



## **Confronting the Other: Understanding Empathy**

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### **Abstract**

The concept of empathy is strongly at play across the field of education. In analyzing literature from which this concept both emerges and presently appears, this review elaborates on what empathy affords the educational enterprise. Drawing from theorists from diverse fields of inquiry, among them education research, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis, we focus on the limits of empathy while questioning what lies beyond. We find that deployments of empathy might actually create more distance between self and other rather than bring about more understanding across difference. Further, in looking at the literature on empathy there is an insufficient attention to broader social considerations that impact understandings of the other. In light of what we find to be problematic about the idea and uses of empathy in education, the paper concludes with speculations about how practicing educators might adequately address the inherent problems within learning across difference.

*Keywords:* empathy, phenomenology, psychoanalysis

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### Confronting the Other: Understanding Empathy

What we want from education it has not given us. We hope that students will become ethical actors in the world through learning about the people with whom they cohabitate, celebrate, and mourn, the systems that give rise to opportunity and that sustain violence, and the processes by which they form their common notions about how it works. Of course we recognize that the world has wonderful people, and do not wish to convey an inappropriate or staggering pessimism. But the fact remains that gross injustices go ignored—often willfully. And so as educators, we seek to foster a sense of empathy in our students. That is, we ask individuals to consider another's perspective before deciding on a course of action of their own.

Across several fields of educational research, we find the term empathy strongly at play. Within the research literature in history education, the term empathy generally denotes the ability to cognitively reconstruct how historical actors experienced their world, thereby providing properly historicized explanations for past actions (Ashby & Lee, 1987; Lee & Ashby, 2001; Portal, 1987; Shemilt, 1984; Yeager & Foster, 2001). The term is also implicit in much of the literacy research on readers' responses to literature, and becomes explicit in some research on students engagement with multicultural literature (Louie, 2005). Finally, empathy plays a small but crucial role in some of the work that theorizes the development of an anti-racist consciousness (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997; Howard, 1999).

Looked at through this lens, it becomes apparent that empathy is crucial—both as a process we initiate and as an outcome we achieve—in working across cultural divides. Indeed, as we shall see in the next section, debates about empathetic understanding have been present in western thinking since the Romantics first started to celebrate human difference in the nineteenth century. Hence, we see our own research as an important intervention not only in current

educational research, but also as an attempt to provide a more nuanced conceptualization of empathy, one that will allow educational researchers and practicing teachers to make better sense of the sensitivities needed for ethical living in a pluralistic world.

As educators and researchers, then, we need to think about the complexity of the empathetic task: what it is that we put at risk, what do we gain, and what might we lose as we implore and explore empathy? Insofar as empathic understanding is most commonly used in educational setting, it is perhaps ill suited to do that which we might wish. Indeed, it all too often strengthens the divisions between self and other—that which we least want it to do.

In the paper, we first seek to situate the emergence of the idea of empathy in its nineteenth-century context. We do this so as to provide historical perspective on current uses of the term, and so as to make explicit our own desire to tell a particular story about empathy—one that may have very different beginning and ending points for scholars with differing projects.<sup>1</sup> In the next section of the paper, we move to further define empathy by looking at its structure as it emerges from lived experience and ego formation. Here, we show the dangers inherent in empathy, whereby it may affirm the self at the expense of the other.

In the next section of the paper, we give attention to the way sociality is ignored in early attempts to write about empathy. We correct the omission of social factors by using psychoanalytic concepts such as the big Other, the signifying chain, and the master's discourse. Finally, since the desire in education for students to consider others in ethical ways is by all means appropriate—indeed, of the utmost importance—we move to offer the idea of love as that towards which we should ultimately look when we speak of empathy. It is not that love can or should replace empathy in our talk in education, but more so the idea that empathy reaches a

limit in its consideration of the other that love might help it to surpass. We conclude with a note on teaching.

### **The Problematic of Empathy and its Influence Contemporary Research Discourses**

Intellectual historians such as Alain Finkielkraut (1988) and Isaiah Berlin (1991) have pointed to the key role of one figure in the early theorization of cultural pluralism: Johann Gottfried Herder. Of his early nineteenth-century “discovery of difference,” Berlin (1991) writes:

The conception that there are many different ends that men [sic] may seek and still be fully rational, fully men [sic], capable of understanding each other and sympathising and deriving light from each other, as we derive it from reading Plato or the novels of medieval Japan—worlds, outlooks, very remote from our own. (p. 11)

Sympathizing, or more correctly, empathizing (*Einfühlung*) is that method of understanding which allows us to communicate across time and space, to understand the “cultural other.” Hence, from the moment where cultural diversity and pluralism become issues of importance, empathy becomes the tool of choice for both understanding and bridging it (Bahr, Durrant, Evans, & Maughan, 2008).

Herder’s use of an empathetic method for working across cultural divides is, for the story we wish to tell here, most importantly taken up by the early systematizers of the hermeneutic and human science tradition<sup>ii</sup>—and in particular, through the work of Wilhelm Dilthey (Portal, 1983). However, in the mature work of Dilthey (1900/1972), empathy as Herder’s “feeling one’s way” (*sich einfühling*) into other life contexts gives way to empathy as “re-feeling” (*Nachfühling*) and “re-experiencing” (*Nacherleben*) the lifeworlds<sup>iii</sup> which gave rise to the texts that come to us from the past. Or as Dilthey himself claimed (1900/1972):

much of our happiness as human beings derives from our re-experiencing [*Nachfühling*] of alien states of mind; the entire science of philology and of history is based on the presupposition that such recomprehension [*Nachverständnis*] of individual existence can be raised to objective validity . . . So at the threshold of human studies we encounter a problem specific to them alone and quite distinct from anything involved in the apprehension of nature. (pp. 230-231)

For Dilthey, then, empathy (now conceptualized as “re-feeling”) is the basis upon which any individual act of understanding takes place—and in particular, those artful acts of understanding that stand as the foundation for the human sciences.

As Austin Harrington (2001) has noted, though, Dilthey’s views on the role of empathy in understanding have tended to be mischaracterized by contemporary human science theorists. In particular, both Gadamer and Habermas are thought to “fail to distinguish properly between the specific problematic concept of *Einfühlung* and a wider legitimate function of feeling and imagination in understanding” (p. 313). That is, confusion over two conflicting views runs throughout debates over the role of empathy in any human sciences methodology: 1) empathy as feelings another’s feelings; and 2) empathy as an imaginative reconstruction of another’s lifeworld.

Interestingly, the tendency to reduce empathy to “just feelings” has tended to be reproduced in the field of contemporary history education, beginning when British history educators introduced empathy into the national reform curriculum of the 1970s and 1980s (Lee & Ashby, 2001). While the movement for an empathetic history curriculum was grounded firmly in the cognitive—“it is where we get to when we have successfully reconstructed other peoples’ beliefs, values, goals, and attendant feelings” (Ashby & Lee, 1987, p. 63)—subsequent criticism

of the term's use, both in the US and the UK, drove history educators to an even larger extreme, eventually reaching the point where affect and emotion were seen as potential defects in a student's thinking. Hence, Karen Riley (2001), in writing about Holocaust education, could claim that "the problem with working in the affective domain is that teachers often use history to inculcate compassion or other similar feelings within students rather than offer them a useful framework with which they can conduct individual inquiry" (p. 154). We find such separations—compassion from inquiry—problematic (Garrison, 1997).

Barton and Levstik (2004) have written quite movingly about this unfortunate turn of events. As they note, history without care, feeling, or emotion is "a soulless enterprise, a constraint on motivation that warrants reconsideration of the subject's place in the curriculum. We cannot interest students in the study of history . . . if we dismiss their feeling and emotions" (pp. 228-229). Barton and Levstik identify five different ways in which an affective empathy might matter for contemporary classrooms engaged in the study of human difference. In particular, we will note two of them now as a potential point from which our own work might be said to emerge: "caring for" the other; and "caring to" revise our own actions and beliefs in light of what we have learned. We will return to the connections between care, empathy and classroom life as we close the paper.

### **Stein and Klein: Empathy's Structure, and Its Role in the Formation of the Self**

What is missing from all of the above accounts, we feel, is a look at the lived structure of empathy, in and of itself. Phenomenology allows us to do just that, by asking: What is the lived meaning of empathy? What role does it play in human experience? In particular, we will answer these questions by first turning to the writings of Edith Stein before then moving to discuss our own subsequent revisions of her work in light of Melanie Klein. In both cases, we pay particular

attention to the role empathy plays in the constitution of the self, in and through its relation to an other. That is, we will use these two thinkers to introduce the intersubjective dynamic that we feel needs to lie at the heart of any adequate explanation of empathy.

Edith Stein was one of Edmund Husserl's most important pupils, and indeed, much of her own work on the problem of empathy can be seen as growing out of the Husserlian framework. In her doctoral dissertation (subsequently published as *On the Problem of Empathy*, 1917/1989), Stein argues that empathy is the act by which we come to experience the experiences of others. Unlike sympathy, which can be understood as a reproduction of the other's feeling, in all of their primordially, in one's own self, empathy is a projective act, whereby we directly perceive the experience of others, but in a non-primordial way. The structure of this act is similar to other descriptions given by phenomenology: there is an immediate lived apprehension, such as when I see the blush of embarrassment on my friend's face and intuit its meaning. Then there is the fulfillment, when I use context to confirm that this blush is due, not to exertion or anger, but to an embarrassing slip of the tongue. My relationship to the embarrassment is non-primordial, because I do not implicate myself in the slip, and therefore do not experience it as my "own."

Stein therefore uses the concept of empathy to answer the question of how we are able to experience the experiences of others—and in particular, aspects of experience such as affect or feeling. For Stein, foreign experiences are given to us because we perceive the other as inhabiting a living body (*der Leib*)—that is, we immediately "know" that this other body can feel, act, and sense just as we can. It is not a pure material body (*der Körper*), a lifeless corpse or object, existing therefore without a lifeworld. In general, this experience of the vitality of the other is itself co-given with the experiences of the other; that is to say, it is apperceived along with the direct perception of the body itself.<sup>iv</sup> Our contact with the experiences of others are



therefore dependent neither upon the logical operation of deduction nor that of induction—rather, they are given to us in a lived reality that is felt to be both immediate and foreign.

Empathy is therefore an essential moment in the building of a coherent self—empathy divides self from other. Without empathy, as Stein’s work demonstrates, we would have no sense of our own self as an individual. Our own “zero-point” (Stein’s term for the coordinating center of our lived body which helps us establish own from other) becomes balanced by a world where other zero-points exist. Our ability to empathize is therefore ultimately determined by the degree of felt separation between co-existing zero-points. Such a view also would imply that the early relationship between infant, caregiver and world are important precursors in learning how to empathize.

Melanie Klein has made exactly this point. It should therefore be of primary notice that we all have practice with empathy in this sense of the term—indeed, in some ways, it is “no big deal.” If we accept from Klein (and psychoanalytic thinking more generally) that there is an unconscious component to our selves that structures our awareness and perception, then it is clear that empathy begins long before our parents or teachers ask us to “think about the other guy.”

In fact, the knowledge that there are others to whom we must attend begins with the infant recognizing itself as a subject during—according to Lacan (2006)—the mirror stage. As the infant recognizes the self as an integrated whole and a unitary subject—where before she lived out “her” experience of the self as a separated collection of drives—the infant begins to learn that there is a world of objects to which she relates, and which simultaneously relate to her. Klein (1937/1994) describes this as a process of “phantasy-building”—the inauguration of imaginative thinking whereby the object (the caregiver) need not necessarily be physically

present in order to still exist for the infant. The infant can now *imagine* the object being there, and this imagination is incarnation enough to satisfy its desire. While Klein did not label this object-relation an empathic one, it seems to build the capacity for such undertakings. It is this imaginative capacity to produce an other, to produce the presence of an object not physically present, upon which we would theorize empathy.

Of course, this imaginary relationship to the other is not in itself a full theory of empathy. But as we proceed through this early infant-caregiver relationship, we can see that the next task for the infant is to recognize that the world is not centered in her erogenous cravings. In oscillating between rage and love, between being given attention and having attention given elsewhere, the infant must negotiate the reality of the caregiver needing to attend to tasks other than the care of the infant's own self, thereby shattering the infantile wish of being all there is. Empathy is instrumental, then, for allowing the self to be de-centered from the world and to help the young ego allow for the existence of others and understand these others as also being constituted with desires, wants, and needs of their own.

Comparing the views of Melanie Klein with her near contemporary, Edith Stein, is therefore revealing. For Klein, empathy de-centers, while for Stein, it centers. For Klein, empathy is a moment in granting the other her own separate existence, while for Stein, such acknowledging reaffirms the self. Rather than view these as conflicting accounts of the same empathetic phenomenon, we would instead suggest that they perfectly lay out the dilemma we face. That is, we need an account of empathy that does justice to both interdependence and independence, to both a bordering subjectivity and a breeching and interpenetrating intersubjectivity. We will take this point up in earnest in the final section of the paper.

Yet for now, we wish to stress the point that empathy has been both oversold and

undersold in the educational literature. On the one hand, empathy is present with us from very early on in our lives, as we all have the capacity to recognize the lived feelings and experiences of others. On the other hand, the capacity to empathize, serving as it does as a bridge to the other, always implicates the way in which we think about ourselves. It is both “a big deal” and “no big deal.”

For teachers and students, the implications are therefore clear: students and teachers have already rehearsed the performance of the empathic drama many times before they enter the classroom (Todd, 2003). Furthermore, since we are prone to replaying these early scripts, it is with certainty that empathy is a part of any educational transaction within a school setting—where students can never be the sole object of the teacher’s attention. The question therefore becomes not whether empathy is part of the educational experience—it is—but instead becomes what happens when there is a further pedagogical intent to have students perform empathy as either learning strategy or outcome. We turn to this question in the next section of our paper by exploring the way in which sociality impinges upon the empathic relationship.

### **Levinas and Lacan: Empathy and Sociality**

A clear shortcoming in the work of Edith Stein is its lack of attention to sociality. The other is present in Stein’s work—indeed, it absolutely necessary. But that other is not given sufficient attention in her own right. Neither is it acknowledged that the other comes to us socially-coded, a product not of pure perception, but of culturally-constructed ways of seeing and perceiving. In short, the empathetic performances described by Stein are an overly simplistic I-Thou relationship, one that does not acknowledge that the *optical* moment of engagement with another always take place before and within an *audience* (in the strictest sense of that term: *The state or condition of hearing, or of being able to hear*).<sup>v</sup>

This transition to sociality, from the optical to the auricular, is undertaken by Emmanuel Levinas' in his *Totality and Infinity* (2002). While empathy is not a term that is prominent in the work itself, we feel that Levinas' own conceptualization of the relationship between self and other is crucial to our own project, as it begins to introduce ethical and social wrinkles into the fabric of empathy and empathic understandings.

Levinas argues that the other's relationship to the self is one of complete alterity. Our relationship is not as separate species joined by a common genus, but of two "separate subjects," each overflowing the status they are assigned by the aggressivity of the other's gaze. This moment of overflowing (the other is not contained by my perception of her), Levinas refers to as "infinity," and claims that its idea is produced in and through speech. Hence, speech, or discourse, is what creates a relationship—a common humanity.<sup>vi</sup>

Discourse, for Levinas, is not a simple exteriorization of an interior thought. As he rightly notes, "modern investigations in the philosophy of language have made familiar the idea of underlying solidarity of thought with speech." He goes on to note that "thought consists in foraging in the system of signs, in the particular tongue of a people or civilization, and receiving signification from this very operation" (2002, p. 206). Hence, our discourse with another, our commerce, is inherently social. Indeed, while the dyadic relation of separate subjects is the plain upon which the ethical is carried out, it is always before an audience of still more:

Everything that takes place here "between us" concerns everyone, the face that looks at it places itself in the full light of the public order . . . Language as the presence of the face does not invite complicity with the preferred being, the self-sufficient "I-Thou" forgetful of the universe . . . The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other—language is justice. (2002, pp. 212-213)

Society calls us to account in our interactions with other subjects—once discourse breeches alterity, the obligation to respond is placed upon us in the full light of “public order.”

Yet Levinas remains uncomfortable with the notion of free-floating signification, of a symbolic chain that engulfs self and other in a series of shifting displacements. Seeing in this pattern a denial of the ethical, Levinas preserves in his thought a special foundation for discourse and the ethical relationship: the face (*le visage*). For Levinas, the face is incapable of being signified. It is pure “expression,” an “epiphany:”

To manifest oneself as a face is to *impose oneself* above and beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form, to present oneself in a mode irreducible to manifestation, the very straightforwardness of the face to face, without the intermediary of any image, in one’s nudity, that is, in one’s destitution and hunger. (2002, p. 200)

Without discarding the importance of Levinas’ work for our own—in his ability to conceive of a subject/object relationship outside of the dialectic (“separate subjects”), in his acknowledgement of the social within the empathetic dyad, and in his relentless advocacy for the ethical as the foundation for knowledge—we nonetheless remain deeply skeptical of the ability of the face to function as Levinas claims it does. We therefore turn to psychoanalytic frames in the remainder of this section, and in particular, to the work of Jacques Lacan.

Lacan’s notion of the unconscious—noting that, for him, it is “the discourse of the Other.” Slavoj Žižek (2008), himself a helpful decoder of Lacan’s work, explains that this “big Other” represents:

society’s unwritten constitution . . . the second nature of every speaking being: it is here, directing and controlling my acts; it is the sea I swim in, yet remains ultimately impenetrable—I can never put it in front of me and grasp it. It is as if we, subjects and

language, talk and interact like puppets, our speech and gestures dictated by some nameless all-pervasive agency. (p. 8)

The big Other, then, is the discourse that works on us. Put somewhat differently, we do not speak a language, that language speaks us. We are, in effect, placed by discourse—in fluid rather than fixed ways—within a structure of symbols called the “symbolic chain.” For Lacan (2006), the Other’s discourse *is* the unconscious, itself “structured like language,” because of the workings of the symbolic field. The unconscious engages our desire, indeed, founds it: because the symbolic is elusive, because it is never “here,” but always “somewhere else,” we as speaking subjects tend to have our speaking acts pulled along the somewhat familiar tracks that constitute normative ways of speaking and acting in the world. That is, the unconscious orients us towards particular understandings of the world (and away from others), working almost like the everyday conceptualizations that pass for common sense. Therefore, the way we understand the world and the objects that we find there depends upon the big Other. Considered in this way, in any empathic encounter, there is a necessity for considering not just the one-to-one relationship between a self and other, but also a consideration of the discursive practices that are implicated in and through the big Other. In other words, the concept of the big Other introduces a third term in the otherwise dyadic relationships of analyst/analysand and self/other that traditionally hold sway in both phenomenological and psychoanalytic thinking. It is this third field, socially constructed and evolving, towards which the big Other orients us.

Lacan’s signifying chain refers to the constellation of signifiers that give meaning its illusion of stability and certainty, along which the subject slides as different positions are occupied, and through which we conceptualize self in relation to others. As with constellations of stars, for example, the signifying chain is significant not only in the ways that individual

signifiers indicate and confer meaning, but instead on how meaning is indicated and produced based on the relationships between them. Lacan (2006) illustrates the concept of the symbolic chain in his “Seminar on the Purloined Letter,” in which he reflects upon Poe’s story of a stolen letter used in a blackmailing scheme. For Lacan, the stolen letter exemplifies the signifier, circulating through the story from character to character. What Lacan (2006) offers via this lecture is the idea that the signifier, in its displacement:

determines subjects’ acts, destiny, refusals, blindnesses, success, and fate, regardless of their innate gifts and instruction, and regardless of their character or sex; and that everything pertaining to the psychological pre-given follows willy-nilly the signifiers train, like weapons and baggage. (p. 21)

To exemplify this situation, we will share a brief story about a research encounter that one of us recently had. In undertaking a study about difficult knowledge, the first author arranged to meet several study participants at the Holocaust Memorial and Museum in Farmington Hills, Michigan. Later, one of the participants asked the first author the following question about his drive to the Memorial: *Why do I immediately feel the need to turn the music down or off? Why, indeed. For who told the participant that this was the way to approach a Holocaust Memorial?* There was not a sign on the freeway that asked all those going to visit the Holocaust Memorial to turn down their music, and there was not a passenger in the car who would have been able to report the kind of music he had been listening to. In essence, though, *there was* someone else in the car with the participant: the big Other.

This story underscores the functioning of the symbolic chain, in terms of the degree to which something beyond conscious awareness compels the actions of ourselves and our students. We are in so many ways compelled to action because of our location in these symbolic

coordinates, and because of an unconsciously interpolated message about what it is that we should or should not do. One could say our location within the symbolic chain trains us to think in certain ways and not others. When we enter into a conversation about cultural difference, for example, we enter an exchange already long in progress, complete with a history and certain ways of knowing and articulating experience. This is to say, then, that the existence of signifying chains determine individual understandings of the relationship between the self and another. It introduces a seemingly outside consideration to an otherwise one-to-one encounter, complicating our endeavor to consider the other ethically.

### **The Varieties of Classroom Experience, or, What's Love Got to Do with It?**

More often than not, the focus of an encouraged classroom empathy is to aid students in becoming attentive to the difference, pain, or misfortune of others. It is outwardly guided, moving on a one-way track from student to stranger. But the journey is always round-trip. The way and the manner of this "Return" lie at the very heart of the problem of classroom empathy.

When a student attaches some meaning to a victim of genocide or natural disaster, that meaning is dependent upon her own individual psychic history. But the story of empathy neither begins nor ends in the class session, and these psychic histories, as we have discussed, are at least in part socially mitigated and determined. This gives rise to the need to consider a third term. And, even though we often go to the places furthest away for our empathetic performances—for, we would argue, it is all too often easier to empathize with the starving Ethiopian child than the homeless person whom we pass on the street—this performance always takes place within the individually-situated psychic realities of those who are physical occupants of the classroom. It is to these types of classroom performances that we next turn.

Sharon Todd (2003) outlines two common types of performances where the big Other



seemingly blocks the type of empathetic performance we as teachers seek. The first is as a defense of the ego. This manifestation of empathy can be exemplified in a student articulating a thought in two parts: first, their surprise at learning of the suffering of another, and then, secondly, their gratitude for the comforts in their own life. In this case, we are hoping to protect a construction of the world that feels safe—normal—but is put in jeopardy by the “new” knowledge to which we are attending. In our position as teacher educators, we find this particular performance of empathy less than desirable, but acknowledge that it is what we often get. Indeed, in recollecting our own early teaching experiences, we remember having students read accounts of the plight of Sudanese children who were forced into military service, or diaries of lonely and homesick wives moving across the western frontier. Our students’ protective performances helped them articulate pleasure at being “here” rather than “there.” Although a common response, this does not seem completely ethical to us, and is, in fact, ethically congruent with pointing, laughing, and then exclaiming, “sucks to be you.”

This *schadenfreude*-approach to empathy is roundly denounced in the empathy literature of history education—but, we feel, for the wrong reasons. For we are not so interested in valorizing the cognitive over the affective performance of empathy (as has tended to happen there), but rather we concern ourselves with the ethical effects of any particular empathetic performance. Ego-defensive performances of empathy deny the other—as a separate subject—their existence as such; the student only understands that the other is “not me” (and thankfully so).

Todd’s (2003) second case is when the ego boundaries expand such that the other is incorporated as part of the self and, therefore, must necessarily be taken care of in ethical ways. In this experience of empathy, it is identification with the other that takes the place of a rejection.

It is this identification with the other which most clearly aligns with the best of the historical empathy literature: Barton and Levstik's (2004) call for history teacher to encourage "care for" the victims of the past. For in this approach, empathetic classroom performances are understood as important "tools" or "resources" which afford ethical and democratic action in the present.

We worry, however, that this identification again makes "them" too much a part of "us" (VanSledright, 2001). It does not allow for the existence of the other as a constituted subject in his or her own right. It, in effect, assimilates that person in an affirmation that she is "just like me." Of course, we want to encourage students to understand the commonalities that human's share, but we do not wish to encourage people to equate the singularity of their own experiences with the ultimately unknowable singularity of an other's.

In opposition to these two cases, we conceptualize a third way to conceive of empathic performances. It is to ask how one might understand others not as part of our own selves—"just like us"—but as an existing subject with desires and needs of its own. Žižek (2008) explains an effort in Iceland to do just this: where an other (another nationality, sexuality, etc.) is welcomed to the home of a "normal" family—normal here meaning part of the dominant culture—to have a conversation, therefore making a "subject" where there was once an "other."

For the fundamental problem here is that when considering an other, we are considering an object as opposed to a subject. The difference between an object and a subject is, as exemplified here, that the subject is imbued with an expectation of having desires and wishes of their own. An object is imbued with the desires and wishes of the subject to whom the object is "attached". An object, in other words, is less-than-human, denied the right to exist as an autonomous being within the world. The point of such Žižekian encounters, we believe, is what Levinas calls the "face-to-face." In welcoming the other into the very home of the self, of

responding to the face of the other and the obligation for listening and dialogue which it imposes, the very notion of normality itself is called into question. Yet, while such an approach may indeed be a point from which to conceive and practice empathy, it falls short for classroom practice—a site where the “face-to-face” and the calling into the question of one’s “home” is often not possible. Feeling-sorry-for, feeling-the-pain-and-hunger-of, feeling-the-whip-on-the-back and the-noose-around-the-neck: those feelings, those emotional attachments, they are the ways the symbolic interacts with the real—in short, the performance of empathy. For Lacan, the Real is that which is immediately and irrevocably unattainable in terms of understanding or enunciating, which is why “the real can only be inscribed on the basis of an impasse of formalization”—that is, where the normal paths of meaning-making consciously break down for the subject (1998, p. 93). Therefore, the closer one gets to the Real, the more fantasy and psychic defenses are forced into action; encounters with the Real are literally traumatic, as the representation of these experiences is rendered impossible.

It is a cause for great anxiety, then, that empathy asks a subject to “walk in the shoes of another”—since this is clearly not possible. Consider those settings where empathetic performance is invited in the classroom. When a student is confronted with an image of the Holocaust, they are empathizing within a particular symbolic chain. Their position “speaks” them. In other words, it holds fixed the person captured in suffering, or after suffering, as “victim,” as “object-deserving-of-my-attention.” The subject position of the student is one of giving—giving attention, giving affect—and is not necessarily positioned to receive, to be penetrated by, either by that image or by a reciprocal relationship with another separate subject. It is only by repositioning the student as not only giver, but receiver, that an ethico-erotic relationship can be maintained between the subject and that to which the subject attaches

knowledge.<sup>vii</sup>

Just as the detectives in “The Purloined Letter”—blinded by the power of the phallic position of power they hold—are certain that their method of criminal investigation will yield their wanted results, we as educators have too often been guilty of thinking that if students could only empathize with the other, we would have an ethical result. But as Lacan (2006) reminds us in that “Seminar on the Purloined Letter,” it is the method of investigation that constitutes its object. So yes, we get something akin to empathy, but it is not empathy that we really want.

As teachers, then, what we are really after is a consideration of an other as a separate subject, capable of his or her own thoughts, desires, and wishes, in dialogue with our own. And as such, the relationship of empathy needs to be founded upon something like love. For love is constituted of a reciprocity, of an acknowledgement and a tolerance of another being. When in love, according to Young-Bruehl (2003), “we allow ourselves to be receptive . . . of love from another, who, as a real person, can give it” (p. 9). The Return that seems missing from the symbolic structuring of empathy is precisely the idea of receptivity; where the energy of empathy is outward moving, love mandates some modicum of return. It is the vulnerability of being open to such care, which is rehearsed in the helplessness of infancy, that might work to structure our understandings of who we are in society in such a way as to yield more humane notions of who we are as we face the separate subject about whom we happen to be learning.

Lacan, for whom love is defined by giving something that one does not have, provides that “psychoanalysis alone recognizes the knot of imaginary servitude that love must always untie anew or sever” (2006, p. 80). An imaginary servitude to what or whom? While Lacan does not specify, it is likely the case that love’s severing capability works in relation to the Master’s discourse, the big Other. The loving relationship within analysis works to re-order, rearrange,

and re-understand the subject's awarenesses in the world. To untie the knots of servitude that constitute the constructions of meanings that individuals live by, and through, is close both to the heart of the pedagogical endeavor as well as to the mutuality of love. Indeed, Lacan (1998) says that "love is the sign that one is changing discourse" (p. 16).

While changing discourse is not easy, nor without turmoil, it very well could be the turn that leads to the type of empathetic performances we as teachers are after. These issues arise often in our own teaching, as we ask students to question their dearly held assumptions about the world. Often these conversations are difficult and emotional. But if we are to take Lacan at his word, then this is a sign of a relationship of love, where subjects constituting a social space are being *a/*effected by ideas from an other. In thinking of classroom interactions where students are expected to learn from their encounter with an other, the landscape of what it means to learn, to express learning, and to articulate "knowing" would be altered in tremendous ways, since an empathy founded upon love is sublime.

### **A Final Word to Those Who Teach: Getting Empathy to Do What It Might For Us**

This paper has taken up the issue of encouraging empathy among our students. It has pointed out the crucial role of empathy in both centering and de-centering the self, and the importance of directing our best pedagogical efforts at artfully structuring "the Return"—to ensuring that empathetic performances are not overtaken by the dominant social codes and master discourses that all too often objectify the other. We have argued that teachers and their students most definitely should consider the stranger, their plight, and the ways in which we are implicated in their lives and vice-versa. However, what calls for the most attention is the degree to which—and the ways in which—those occupants of the classroom allow that knowledge to

come home, and the challenges attendant upon the discursive breaks that will allow this to happen.

As we noted in the above, the best discussions of empathy in the educational literature—such as those given by Barton and Levstik (2004)—borrow from the ideas of Nel Noddings and in particular, her *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (1992). And indeed, our work mirrors Noddings' own, in that empathy for us is (as care is for her) both an instrument of the profession and an achievement towards which all education—rightly understood—must aim. Yet we would not want that a recurrent criticism of care theory be transferred on to our own. For, at times, care theory comes perilously close to forgetting the teacher—of reducing her to the stock image of the selfless maternal figure who is ever present and available to the child. Jim Garrison (1997) expresses this concern by reminding us that “people who do not blaze with their own passions burn out” (p. 57). We take seriously this need for our own passions to burn.

As teachers, empathy is at play as we shape our identities in relationship to those of our students. Their own (in)capacities to care and empathize can move us to the heights of joy, and the very pit of despair. Yet such a dynamic cannot sustain a robust self in the long term—for all fires require the consumption of fuel, and working with children for eight or more hours a day may not provide the fodder the flames most need.

We therefore urge our colleagues who care about empathy to continue to find ways for their own selves to be breeched and penetrated; to be loved as well as give love; to seek encounters where established discourse fails and the face of the other opens up new heights upon which a self may be refashioned. At the present moment, such vulnerability in our teachers seems unwelcome, and therefore is perhaps too dangerous for teachers to undertake in

relationship with their students. Yet if empathy is to be taught, it would seem such experiences must in some other context be sought.





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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> In this paper, we draw primarily from thinking in psychoanalysis and phenomenology. We realize that there are other disciplines which have done work on the topic of empathy, and which we do not discuss here. In particular, we wish to acknowledge the informed comments of an anonymous reviewer who not only helped us in our interpretation of Lacan, but pointed us to work in experimental psychology on neuroimaging in primates and infants. We must acknowledge that such work is beyond the scope of both our expertise and interests.

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<sup>ii</sup> Whenever we speak of the “human sciences” or the “human sciences tradition,” we are referring to the line of thinking inaugurated by Wilhelm Dilthey, who popularized the distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* (natural or “hard” sciences) and *Geisteswissenschaften* (cultural or human sciences). See Palmer, 1969, pp. 98ff.

<sup>iii</sup> “Lifeworld” and “lived experience” are key terms in the lexicon of phenomenology. The lifeworld is “the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize or reflect on it” (Van Manen, 2001, p. 9). Likewise, lived experience “involves our immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life: a reflexive or self-given awareness which is, as awareness, unaware of itself” (Van Manen, 2001, p. 35).

<sup>iv</sup> The notion of apperception is important in phenomenology. It refers to those aspects of experience that are “given” in perception, even though they are not directly perceived. For example, the other sides of a cube are given to us in ordinary perception, even though we do not “see” them directly as we do the face of the cube.

<sup>v</sup> There is a long-running critique in postmodern thought of the role of sight and vision in the thought of modernity. Critiques of the masculine gaze, surveillance, objectification of the other, will be familiar to many readers. The ability to listen and hear, by contrast, stands at the base of several postmodern projects engaged with ethics—in particular, within the thought of Levinas.

<sup>vi</sup> Unlike so much of the existing literature of empathy, then, a common humanity is not a starting point for Levinas, but an achievement, something that happens when two separate subjects are brought into a relationship by discourse.

<sup>vii</sup> See also Bersani (1987) for the importance of this “penetration.”