Phenomenology as a Form of Empathy

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ABSTRACT This paper proposes that adopting a ‘phenomenological stance’ enables a distinctive kind of empathy, which is required in order to understand forms of experience that occur in psychiatric illness and elsewhere. For the most part, we interpret other people’s experiences against the backdrop of a shared world. Hence our attempts to appreciate interpersonal differences do not call into question a deeper level of commonality. A phenomenological stance involves suspending our habitual acceptance of that world. It thus allows us to contemplate the possibility of structurally different ways of ‘finding oneself in the world’. Such a stance, I suggest, can be incorporated into an empathetic appreciation of others’ experiences, amounting to what we might call ‘radical empathy’.

I. Introduction

My aim in this paper is to show that the kind of methodological stance adopted by Edmund Husserl and, in slightly different forms, by subsequent phenomenologists, enables a form of empathy. Although Jaspers (1962) emphasises the empathetic role of phenomenology, Husserl does not (Walker, 1995). However, my claim is not that Husserl’s phenomenological method is empathy. Rather, I suggest that it can facilitate a distinctive kind of empathy, which I call ‘radical empathy’. In the absence of radical empathy, certain changes in the structure of experience that occur in psychiatric illness and also in a range of other contexts are either misinterpreted or altogether resist interpretation.1 Radical empathy is uncommon, and this is partly why people suffering from conditions such as severe depression, schizophrenia and depersonalisation complain that others cannot understand what is happening to them. For example, many first-person accounts of depression stress that various aspects of the experience are indescribable and/or beyond the understanding of anyone who has not experienced them. As one sufferer remarks, “I have no words to describe this

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thing that was totally alien to my life experience”. They often add that an inability to share their experiences with others exacerbates the sense of estrangement that is so central to their predicament.

Instead of resigning ourselves to the view that such experiences are out of bounds to phenomenology, we can regard them as a phenomenological challenge. Although I do not rule out the possibility that some experiences will forever elude us, I will show how radical empathy expands the range of intelligible experiences. It can thus amount to a way of doing phenomenology: we study the structure of experience by exploring the kinds of change that it is susceptible to. Hence phenomenological enquiry need not be an exclusively first-person affair; it can incorporate a distinctive kind of engagement with the experiences of others. The kind of empathetic understanding that I describe here is also of therapeutic significance, given its potential to assist ‘reconnection’ with others.

I will begin in Section II by contrasting and then combining two approaches to empathy, in order to provide a fairly permissive conception of empathy. Following this, I will argue that, even if we conceive of empathy in such a way, there is a distinctive form of empathy that evades characterisation – radical empathy. In Section III, I will make clear what it is that more ‘mundane’ acts of empathy fail to accommodate. Then, in Section IV, I will describe the ‘stance’ that makes radical empathy distinctive. Finally, in Sections V and VI, I will discuss the application of radical empathy and show how it facilitates an understanding of changes in the structure of experience that would otherwise be misconstrued.

II. The Nature of Empathy

The term ‘empathy’ is used in several different ways. Much of the recent philosophical discussion of empathy has been focused around the debate between ‘theory’ and ‘simulation’ theories of interpersonal understanding. Theory theorists maintain that our ability to understand other people’s mental states depends upon deployment of a systematically organised body of conceptual knowledge, which is domain-specific and largely tacit. Simulation theorists, in contrast, emphasise the ability to use our own cognitive resources to model the mental states of other people (see e.g. Davies and Stone, 1995). Some simulation theorists identify ‘simulation’
with ‘empathy’. For example, Goldman (2006, p.17) refers to the “simulation (or empathy) theory”, and Stueber (2006, p.4) likewise assumes that empathy amounts to simulation. A distinction is often drawn between two different kinds of simulation. There is explicit simulation, which occurs when we imaginatively and knowingly project ourselves into the situation or psychological predicament of another person. And there is implicit simulation, where simulation of the other person’s cognitive states is a non-conscious process. Thus a distinction is similarly drawn between two kinds of empathy. We have what Stueber (2006, pp.20-21) calls “basic empathy” - one might perceive, for example, that someone is angry without knowingly simulating or modelling her emotional state. In addition, there is “re-enactive empathy”, where various cognitive resources are consciously used to reconstruct the person’s experience, enabling a more sophisticated appreciation of her mental life and behaviour. De Vignemont (2010) makes much the same distinction, using the terms “mirror empathy” and “reconstructive empathy”.

Some have criticised the simulationist assumption that successful empathy requires first-person replication of others’ experiences. Work in the phenomenological tradition by Scheler, Husserl, Stein and others points to a different conception of empathy. As Dan Zahavi puts it, empathy is construed here as “a basic, irreducible, form of intentionality that is directed towards the experiences of others” (2010, p.291). Hence it is a mistake to regard first-person access to experience as the only mode of access. When we perceive the behaviour of others, we perceive something of their experience in their behaviour. In so doing, we perceive that experience as theirs, and thus in a very different way to how we would if we experienced it as our own. Scheler (e.g. 1954, p.8) advocates such a position, although he does not refer to the relevant achievement as ‘empathy’ (Zahavi, 2010). We also find it in Stein (1989), whose account I will focus on here, as it is closest to the permissive conception of empathy that I wish to adopt.

Stein uses the term ‘empathy’ to encompass all “acts in which foreign experience is comprehended” (1989, p.6). She stresses that it is not a matter of having the same feeling as someone else and then attributing that feeling to him. Instead, from the outset, one experiences the feeling as his. There is a “two-sidedness” to empathy: we have an experience of our own that “announces” another experience as someone
else’s (1989, p.19). Interestingly, Stein explicitly maintains that empathy is never a matter of simulating a mental state and then projecting it onto someone else. She acknowledges that this is something we sometimes do, but claims that we only resort to it when empathy fails. Suppose we were unable to experience a joyful person as joyful. We could still come to appreciate her joy through the indirect route of putting ourselves in her position, experiencing joy ourselves and then attributing it to her. But then we never experience her joy. Instead, we experience our own joy and attribute a similar state to her. Stein is equally clear that empathy is not a “feeling of oneness” or a matter of “emotional contagion”. It essentially involves presenting someone else’s experience as theirs, and thus incorporates a distinction between self and other (1989, pp. 14-23).

We might wonder how it is that experience is perceived in behaviour. For Stein, part of the answer is that experience and expression are inextricable: “Feeling in its pure essence is not something complete in itself. As it were, it is loaded with an energy which must be unloaded” (1989, p.51). So, in perceiving the expression, you do perceive something of the feeling. She is not wholly clear about what the possible contents of empathy are, but they at least include recognition of the other person as a locus of experience and agency. Although this does not imply a more specific appreciation of what the person is experiencing, Stein indicates that empathy facilitates this too, at least to a degree. We can perceive through empathy that someone is happy or afraid. Even so, it is arguable that empathy, as conceived of by Stein, is restricted to a fairly shallow understanding of experience. Appealing to Scheler and Stein, Zahavi (2007, p.37) regards empathy as “an ability to experience behaviour as expressive of mind”. But this emphasis on a perceptual or quasi-perceptual ability seems to rule out more sophisticated empathetic achievements, as there is much that we do not perceive. For example, we might perceive that someone is angry, but the content of our empathetic perception does not include an understanding of why she is angry.

Hence one might respond on behalf of simulation theory that perceptual empathy needs to be supplemented by the simulationists’ ‘re-enactive empathy’. One could further insist that what the phenomenologists refer to as ‘empathy’ is just ‘basic empathy’, an experience of others enabled by sub-personal simulation. However, to
identify the phenomenologists’ conception of empathy with basic empathy would be to risk obscuring a genuine disagreement. That $x$ is involved in process $y$ does not imply that $x$ is responsible for those features that make $y$ distinctive. Even if non-conscious matching processes are involved in empathy, appealing to them does not aid our understanding of what is most central to the phenomenon, as construed by Scheler, Stein and Zahavi: experiencing someone else’s experience as belonging to them. There is thus an important difference between perceptual empathy, construed as a distinctive kind of attitude towards others, and a conception that emphasises non-conscious replication of cognitive states.

But do we need to supplement perceptual empathy with re-enactive empathy? Although Zahavi (2007, 2010) identifies empathy with perception of experience in behaviour, Stein (1989, p.6) is non-committal over how empathetic experience is generated. She is concerned instead with what it consists of. Her account therefore allows for the possibility of empathetic experiences that are generated by cognitive processes, rather than in a perception-like way, and these might have more sophisticated contents. In addition, I see no reason to rule out cognitive elaboration of an empathetic experience that leaves its distinctive structure intact. Hence, in response to the claim that reconstructive or re-enactive empathy is a matter of explicit simulation, it can be maintained that at least some ‘reconstructions’ are not adequately characterised in terms of first-person simulation followed by projection onto another person. Rather, they are embedded in a distinctive kind of attitude towards the person. So I do not deny that we frequently ‘replicate’ the experiences of others in the first-person (consciously and perhaps also non-consciously) when trying to understand them - that would be phenomenologically implausible. It is often easier to empathise with someone when you have been through a similar experience yourself, as exemplified by experiences such as profound grief. Furthermore, an appreciation of what that person is experiencing can be enhanced by ‘reliving’, to an extent, one’s own past experiences. I thus accept that feeling like someone can contribute to an appreciation of her experience. Although replication (conscious or otherwise) is not sufficient for the kind of engagement with someone else’s experience that Stein and others describe, it can still inform an appreciation of her experience as hers (an appreciation that is, of course, fallible and incomplete). We therefore arrive at what could be construed as a kind of ‘hybrid’ account of empathy, according to which
people sometimes rely upon ‘explicit simulation’, and perhaps ‘implicit simulation’ too, but in the context of a distinctive kind of attitude towards the other person. In the absence of that attitude, simulation would not amount to empathy, as the experience would not be other-directed.

III. The Limits of Mundane Empathy

Why the need for ‘radical empathy’ - what aspects of experience does empathy, as characterised in Section II, fail to acknowledge? When you attempt to empathetically understand someone’s experience but concede defeat, you at least recognise that there is a difference between the two of you that you have failed to fully appreciate. A more profound failure of empathy is failing to recognise that there is a difference. Here, the possibility of empathising with the other person’s experience is not even entertained. I want to suggest that there are certain kinds of experiential difference that are not recognised in the absence of radical empathy.

In our everyday encounters with others, we of course appreciate that our own experiences differ in various ways from theirs. Even so, we continue to take much for granted as shared. When you see someone running towards a bus waving, you experience something of her emotion, a sense of urgency and frustration (which you do not feel in quite the same way as you would if it were your own). However, you experience this against a shared backdrop: it is us who co-inhabit a realm of interconnected artefact functions, norms and social roles, a world that incorporates buses, bus stops, departure times, bus drivers, and so on. You do not have to ascribe all of this to the other person via some psychological process. Rather, it is presupposed by your appreciation of psychological differences between self and other, a realm that is not ‘yours’ or ‘mine’ but ‘ours’. So the phenomenological separation between self and other that occurs when her experiences are distinguished from yours is incomplete.

Empathetic understanding of a person rushing after a bus is easily achieved because so much is shared, but not all empathetic achievements presuppose so much. For example, when empathising with a young child, someone from a different culture or someone with a very different set of interests and values, less is taken for granted as shared. If we know or suspect that the other person has never seen buses before and
has no grasp of the norms associated with them, we might, when engaging with her experience, bracket our more usual assumption that these are features of a *shared world*. This is not to suggest that all acts of empathy are made more difficult, or made difficult to the same extent, by cultural differences. Much depends upon the content of the experience with which we are attempting to empathise. For example, when presented with a sobbing face clutched in a person’s hands, cultural differences might not interfere at all with the ability to appreciate her sadness (in some cases, at least). When the content of the experience is not just ‘B is sad’ but ‘B is sad about *p*’, matters are different. Some will find it harder than others to empathise with B’s being sad about the fact that nobody ever visits his Facebook page. Suffice it to say that empathising with others involves suspending, to varying degrees, a world of norms, roles, artefact functions and various other contents. Phenomenologically speaking, this is not so much a matter of recognising that other people do not have exactly the same *internal psychological states* as oneself (although recognition of difference does of course *sometimes* take the form ‘person B’s mental life is unlike mine in respects *p*, *q* and *r*’). Rather, the first step when engaging with difference is to stop presupposing aspects of what is more usually given as *our world*.

We do not take everyone to have exactly the same grasp of the social world, but it would be unusual to interpret another person without assuming at least some kind of shared socio-cultural backdrop. Even so, let us suppose that we did. Even then, the phenomenological separation of our own world from her world would not be total. The interpreter would continue to assume that both parties find themselves *in the same world*, however different that world might appear to each of them. This sense of belonging to a shared world is seldom even recognised as a phenomenological achievement, let alone one that can vary in structure. Indeed, it might be argued that there is no such achievement, that there is nothing more to a person’s world experience than the sum of his various experiences of entities and situations. But I will reject that response. In order to characterise what the sense of belonging to a world consists of, I will offer an account of the ‘phenomenological stance’, a broad methodological orientation common to the work of many phenomenologists, which directs attention towards the ordinarily presupposed world and includes at least some appreciation of what that world consists of. Radical empathy, I will suggest, involves incorporating such a stance into an engagement with others’ experiences. However, it
does not require making that stance an object of reflection. So, whereas phenomenology involves employing a stance, and also describing that stance and what it reveals, radical empathy demands only the former. It is not a singular achievement, restricted to a particular philosophical methodology, but something that can be employed, with varying degrees of explicitness and success, in a range of contexts. All instances of radical empathy are united by a qualitative difference from mundane empathy - their recognition of a variable sense of belonging to a shared world, something that is more usually overlooked.

IV. The Phenomenological Stance and the Sense of Reality

How should we describe the phenomenological stance and what it reveals? In this section, I will sketch one way of doing so, which draws upon an interpretation of Husserl. According to Husserl, the ‘natural attitude’ of believing in the existence of the world is not simply a deeply engrained belief of the form ‘I believe that \( p \)’, like the belief that the Eiffel Tower is in Paris. Rather, it is something we presuppose when we adopt such beliefs. In everyday life, we seldom scrutinise it:

> Waking life is always a directedness toward this or that, being directed toward it as means, as relevant or irrelevant, toward the interesting or the indifferent, toward the private or public, toward what is daily required or intrusively new. All this lies within the world-horizon; but special motives are required when one who is gripped in this world-life reorients himself and somehow comes to make the world itself thematic, to take up a lasting interest in it. (Husserl, 1970b, p.281)

By making the difference clear, we can come to appreciate what is distinctive about a ‘phenomenological stance’ and also radical empathy. Consider my current belief that there is a cup on my desk. Although I believe the proposition ‘there is a cup on my desk’ \( (p) \) to be true, my belief does not usually take that form. I see a cup and, in so doing, take it to be the case that \( p \). The attitude of taking something to be the case is integral to my experience of the cup, rather than something that requires my experiencing something, subsequently formulating proposition \( p \) and then assenting to its truth. Our experiences of and thoughts about the world incorporate a sense of entities as ‘there’, ‘real but not there’, ‘imagined’, ‘remembered’, ‘anticipated’ and so forth - I experience something \( as \) there, \( as \) imagined or \( as \) remembered. Without a
sense of the differences between these ways of encountering things, we would not be able to take anything to be ‘the case’ or ‘not the case’. The contrast would be unintelligible to us, and the attitude of believing would not be amongst our possibilities. As I interpret Husserl’s position, the experience of belonging to the world is not a matter of having a belief-like intentional state with the content ‘the world exists’. Rather, it involves - amongst other things - having a sense of reality, by which I mean a grasp of the distinction between ‘real’, ‘present’ and other possibilities, without which one could not encounter anything as ‘there’ or, more generally, as ‘real’. We generally take for granted that others share this same modal space with us, that they are able to encounter things in the same ways we do.

What does our appreciation of something as ‘there’ or otherwise consist of? According to Husserl, it depends upon the experience of various kinds of possibility. Let us return to the cup. When we look at it, visual experience is not exhausted by what is actually seen. Perception has what Husserl calls a ‘horizontal’ structure, meaning that it incorporates a harmonious web of salient possibilities for perception and action. The cup appears as something that could be accessed visually from another angle or touched, and as something that we might act upon in various ways. These possibilities together comprise a structured system: the object’s ‘horizon’:

Everywhere, apprehension includes in itself, by the mediation of a ‘sense’, empty horizons of ‘possible perceptions’; thus I can, at any given time, enter into a system of possible and, if I follow them up, actual, perceptual nexuses. (Husserl, 1973, p.42)

The horizon of an entity has an intersensory structure. For instance, visual perception incorporates tactual possibilities and vice versa (Husserl, 1973, p.75). The kinds of possibilities that appear differ in their degree of determinacy. An object might say to us ‘if you turn me around, you will see a rough, red surface’ or just ‘if you turn me around, you will reveal a colour and texture’. It is also important to note that horizons have an intersubjective structure. The cup does not just appear as ‘mine’ but also as something that is perceptually and practically available to others. In some cases, rather than presenting itself as ‘available to us’ in some way, it might appear as ‘available to me but not to them’ or ‘available to them but not for me’. Possibilities also present themselves with degrees of confidence. According to Husserl, our default
position is the unthinking, habitual, practical certainty that characterises much of our activity. This involves a kind of non-conceptual, bodily anticipation of what will happen when we act or are acted upon, and our experience of worldly possibilities is thus bound up with our bodily phenomenology (Husserl, 1973; 2001, p.51). It is against the backdrop of habitual certainty that we have localised experiences of uncertainty, doubt and disappointed expectation. However, even where there is localised disappointment, a wider system of interconnected habitual expectations remains intact, without which the structure of experience would break down:

It belongs to what is taken for granted, prior to all scientific thought and all philosophical questioning, that the world is – always is in advance – and that every correction of an opinion, whether an experiential or other opinion, presupposes the already existing world, namely, as a horizon of what in the given case is indubitably valid as existing, and presupposes within this horizon something familiar and doubtlessly certain with which that which is canceled out as invalid came into conflict. (Husserl, 1970a, p.110)

Experience is thus infused with many different kinds of possibility. This becomes even more apparent once we acknowledge that experience incorporates significant possibilities, given that entities are significant to us in a range of different ways. I think this is implicit in much of what Husserl says. For example, he draws a distinction between “open” and “enticing” possibilities, where the latter have a kind of “affective force” (2001, pp.83-90). In other words, we do not simply encounter things as offering possibilities that we might or might not take up – they draw us in to varying degrees. It could be added that things entice us in different ways; something may fascinate us, appear urgent in the context of a project, offer the possibility of pleasure, or compel us to act by incorporating some normative demand. Husserl’s discussion of enticing possibilities emphasises how they draw us in perceptually. Hence it is might be objected that he would not extend the scope of enticing and more generally significant possibilities to the solicitation of non-perceptual activities. However, my view is that he would. Husserl stresses that the experienced world is not a realm of indifferent objects that are surveyed in a detached fashion. In everyday life, we experience entities as possessing kinds of value and utility:
In ordinary life, we have nothing whatever to do with nature-Objects. What we take as things are pictures, statues, gardens, houses, tables, clothes, tools, etc. These are all value-Objects of various kinds, use-Objects, practical Objects. They are not Objects which can be found in natural science. (Husserl, 1989, p.29)

Horizons, I suggest, incorporate a range of significant possibilities. Things might appear enticing, practically significant, threatening, and so on, and these categories can be further differentiated. Something that is practically significant can appear as urgently required, appropriate for the task at hand, significant for others but not for me, significant for us, significant only for me, easy or difficult to use, and so on.11 Something or someone could appear threatening in a range of ways too. A threat might appear as major, minor, imminent, self-directed or directed more generally, avoidable or unavoidable. And people offer up a host of different kinds of possibility too, such as communion and sharing or estrangement and threat.

The experience of at least some kinds of possibility is inextricable from a sense of reality. For instance, Husserl claims that our sense of something being ‘there’, as opposed to – say – ‘imagined’, is tied up with our appreciation of it as potentially perceptually and practically accessible to others. If nothing had the sense ‘available to others’, if that kind of possibility were absent from the world, we could not take things to be the case, at least not in the usual way (Husserl, 1960, *Fifth Meditation*). Although ‘there’ is more specific than ‘real’, our grasp of what it is for something to be real surely incorporates a more specific sense of what it is for something to be present to us. So, without the latter, it seems plausible to maintain that the former would also be absent, or at least impoverished. In what follows, I will suggest that what applies to these kinds of interpersonal possibility applies to various other kinds of significant possibility too – they contribute to our sense of reality. This sense of reality cannot be extricated from a sense of belonging or situatedness, given that experience of worldly possibilities is bound up with bodily anticipation and with the potential for various bodily activities. Our sense of reality and belonging *is* the ‘world’ that we take for granted in the natural attitude. Hence the world operates as a ‘universal horizon’ or ‘world horizon’, a space of possibilities that determines what kinds of experience are intelligible to us. It is importantly different from the horizon of an entity within the world. Whereas a given entity may or may not offer a kind of
possibility, such as being ‘tangible’ or ‘accessible to others’, the universal horizon is what determines the kinds of possibility we are receptive to, and thus whether we are able to experience anything as possessing or lacking that type of possibility. If tangibility did not appear amongst the possibilities that are available to us, then nothing could appear tangible or, for that matter, intangible.  

What, then, is a phenomenological stance? I don’t think we can construe it as an attitude that we first adopt to then reveal the world as a space of possibilities, given that it is unclear how one could adopt that stance, that shift of perspective, without some sense of what it is that one is re-directing attention towards. The stance is not something that is adopted in an instant, with the world then instantaneously revealing itself. Rather, there is a progressive coming into focus of the world. In the process, the attitude itself becomes more clearly resolved. So it is not an attitude with neatly defined boundaries. Even so, we can say at least something about it. I take the essence of a phenomenological stance to involve (i) recognition of an aspect of experience that our everyday concerns presuppose; (ii) a commitment to reflect upon it; and (iii) at least some appreciation of what the relevant phenomenological achievement consists of – what I have described in terms of a space of possibilities, but much the same insight could be communicated in various other ways too. Husserl is often criticised for demanding that a phenomenological stance or “phenomenological reduction” involve complete bracketing of the natural attitude, where the everyday world that we inhabit becomes an object of reflection for some mysterious, detached, observational consciousness. However, the attitude that I describe here does not require anything so extreme, and this less-committal attitude is adopted by phenomenologists who criticise Husserl’s more specific methodological commitments. For example, Merleau-Ponty endorses it, while at the same time stating that the “most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction” (1962, xiv).

V. Radical Empathy and Psychiatric Illness

Once we recognise openness to kinds of possibility as a phenomenological achievement, we can begin to understand changes in the structure of experience that would otherwise elude us. Radical empathy, I propose, is a way of engaging with others’ experiences that involves suspending the usual assumption that both parties
share the same modal space. It is comprised of something akin to the attitude described by Stein, along with openness to kinds of phenomenological difference between people that are not usually acknowledged.\textsuperscript{13} We find such an approach in phenomenological psychopathology. Authors such as Blankenburg (2001), Minkowski (1970), Stanghellini (2004), Sass (1992, 2004, 2007), Sass and Parnas (2007) and others all maintain – in slightly different ways - that psychiatric illness can involve changes in the form of experience, rather than just content, and that that this implicates a habitual, background sense of being immersed in a shared world. Although not all of them explicitly emphasise the central role of possibilities, the analyses they offer can all be couched in such terms. It is not just a matter of applying phenomenological discoveries in the context of psychopathology. We can also study the structure of experience by engaging with the ways in which it can be altered. Ordinarily overlooked aspects of experience become salient when we are presented with their loss, exaggeration or distortion (Ratcliffe, 2008).

Alterations in the sense of reality and belonging should not simply be construed in terms of certain kinds of possibility being added, subtracted, heightened or diminished, as though experience were comprised of separate modal components. Often, changes in the possibility space need to be interpreted in terms of disruption or disharmony, where the temporal flow of organised possibilities does not unfold in the usual way. Suppose, for example, that one lost the usual sense of structured anticipation, the background of habitual certainty that is more usually taken for granted. All objects of experience might then appear as ‘unexpected’, with surprise and bewilderment being the all-encompassing form of one’s world rather than occasional responses to specific occurrences within that world.\textsuperscript{14} Thus there is disruption of an organised whole, rather than ‘loss’ or ‘addition’. More generally, it would be wrong to think of alterations in the form of experience in terms of addition and subtraction. The various kinds of possibility we are receptive to are linked and – to a degree – depend upon each other for their intelligibility. Something that affects one kind of possibility will affect others too. To complicate matters, loss of A might equally be described as addition of B. For instance, the addition of an all-enveloping sense of the future as threatening is at the same time the loss of an enticing and open future. So it would be better to think of transformations of the possibility space, and
to understand talk of loss, addition, intensification, diminishment and disruption (which remains a very convenient way of talking) in these terms.

What evidence is there that changes like this actually occur? There is a vast body of first-person testimony addressing the experience of psychiatric illness, much of which is plausibly interpreted in terms of alterations in an ordinarily presupposed sense of reality and belonging. In fact, it is difficult to see how else it might be understood. Hence, in so far as an interpretive framework derived from phenomenology serves to make sense of various first-person reports, it is itself supported in the process. The case could be made by focusing upon depression, schizophrenia, depersonalisation or a range of other psychiatric conditions. In what follows, I will focus primarily on depression. I will not attempt to present a detailed analysis. Instead, I will briefly discuss some descriptions that illustrate the plausibility of the ‘possibility space’ claim.

Depression comes in many forms, and we should be wary of assuming that different accounts, even when associated with the same diagnosis, refer to the same kind of experience. Even so, a number of themes are common to most accounts. For instance, many people report that all sense of practical significance has been drained from the world. As the world no longer offers the possibility of any significant change, one’s predicament seems eternal, inescapable. In addition to this, most people describe alterations in interpersonal possibilities – the possibility of connecting with others is gone, even though a need for it might remain (Ratcliffe, 2010). A range of other experiential changes are reported, which illustrate (a) the role played by possibility and (b) the connection between a sense of having certain kinds of possibility and the sense of reality. Consider the following interview quotation:

It’s almost like I am there but I can’t touch anything or I can’t connect. Everything requires massive effort and I’m not really able to do anything. Like if I notice something needs cleaning or moving, it’s like it’s out of reach, or the act of doing that thing isn’t in my world at that time… like I can see so much detail but I cannot be a part of it. I suppose feeling disconnected is the best way to describe it. (Patient quoted by Horne and Csipke, 2009, p.663)
What this person describes seems to involve a loss of tangible possibilities from experience and, with it, an alteration of perceived space. Things no longer have their usual practical significance and therefore seem distant, detached. Without such possibilities, a sense of being part of the world is eroded; one becomes disconnected. Loss of practical significance is not the removal of a superficial veneer from experience, which leaves behind an intact sense of reality. Hornstein (2009, pp. 212-13) quotes, at length, the testimony of a man who complains that artefacts lost their “essences”, that they seemed oddly indifferent. What he describes is not a localised change in how certain entities appeared but an alteration in the overall structure of experience. The world, he says, “lost its welcoming quality”. With that, it also lost its usual array of practical possibilities, resulting in an experience of action as somehow impossible. One cannot act in the absence of that which renders the act intelligible:

It became impossible to reach anything. Like, how do I get up and walk to that chair if the essential thing that we mean by chair, something that lets us sit down and rest or upholds us as we read a book, something that shares our life in that way, has lost the quality of being able to do that?

Many first-person reports indicate that depression is characterised by a lack of dynamism. What is gone is the possibility of significant change, and the world is therefore experienced as static. Experience still has a structure, but that structure is somehow diminished. However, some accounts of depressive illness emphasise the experienced world’s changeability. It is not just that how one finds oneself in the world does change abruptly; one also has a constant sense of it as changeable. Experience as a whole is pervaded by a feeling of vulnerability, fragility and insecurity. The sense of reality itself is affected, given that an appreciation of things as independent of one’s own transient predicament, stable, enduring and publically accessible, is eroded. We find such themes in literature too. For example:

That the Boat Basin in Riverside Park would not, at least, remain a sublime and halcyon copse atrot with friendly dogs unnerved her, for the same Hudson walkway would transmogrify into a bleak and trashy strip, its dogs ratty and hostile, the vista of New Jersey grim and aggressively overfamiliar. Sweetspot as well could flip-flop overnight from tasteful clapboard haven to slick, elitist preserve for the spoiled rotten.
Willy resented having responsibility for the fickle landscape outside her mind as well as in; there was no resort. As a seafarer craves dry land, she yearned for anything ineluctable and true, immutably one way or another. Instead Willy was smitten with the awful discovery that even the color of a lamppost was subject to her own filthy moods. (Shriver, 2006, pp.247-8)

We can interpret much of this in terms of changes in the experience of possibility. What offers security at one time takes on the form of threat at another, and the erratic play of significant possibilities itself amounts to an erosion of the sense of belonging, of habitual certainty.\(^\text{15}\)

The same general point about the phenomenology of possibility can also be made with reference to schizophrenia, which likewise involves structural changes in the sense of reality and belonging.\(^\text{16}\) For example, in *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl*, ‘Renee’ describes a brief return to reality. In so doing, she emphasises the role played by practically significant possibilities in constituting a sense of things as *real*, as *there*. For a time, things again became:

\[\ldots\text{useful things, having sense, capable of giving me pleasure. Here was the automobile to take me to the hospital, cushions I could rest on. With the astonishment that one views a miracle, I devoured with my eyes everything that happened. ‘This is it, this is it,’ I kept repeating, and I was actually saying, ‘This is it – Reality’}.\text{(Sechehaye, 1970, pp.105–6)}\]

More so than depression, schizophrenia is characterised by a fragmentation and disruption of experience, a diminishment of habitual and harmonious patterns of practical expectation (Fuchs, forthcoming).\(^\text{17}\)

Thus, various kinds of experience can be understood through a phenomenological stance and interpreted in terms of changes in a sense of reality and belonging. I have suggested that we construe the sense of reality and belonging in terms of a modal space. That space is susceptible to a variety of changes, which affect the sense of reality in different ways and to different extents. However, it is important to stress that such changes are not restricted to extreme states of psychiatric illness. All of us
experience shifts in the form of experience from time to time, which are very difficult
to describe and are more usually conveyed via reference to their causes. Commonplace examples include jetlag and bad hangovers. Experiences such as profound grief, where people report that their whole world has changed beyond recognition, can also be understood in these terms.\footnote{18}{

The kind of phenomenological enquiry that I have sketched here could be pursued in
the first-person too. Someone prone to ‘wobbles’ in the sense of reality and belonging
might use herself as an object of study and thus disclose something of the structure of
experience by attending to its patterns of variation. Alternatively, one might rely
(successfully or unsuccessfully) on imagination. So my claim is not that
phenomenology \textit{must} amount to empathy, but that a phenomenological stance \textit{can be}
integrated into our attempts to engage with the experiences of others. In addition, I
want to maintain that the ‘world’ that comes into focus through a phenomenological
stance has neither a first- nor second-person content, but appears as ‘ours’. Hence
phenomenological reflection is initially uncommitted over whether its object is first-
person or second-person experience; it can be turned towards either. In the second-
person case, we do not simply ‘simulate’ the relevant experiences; that would be an
implausible view when it comes to predicaments as alien to many of us as
schizophrenia and very severe depression. However, this does not rule out empathy in
Stein’s sense: a degree of phenomenological appreciation of someone’s experience \textit{as it is for them}, achieved through a distinctive kind of other-directed attitude. This is
coupled with openness to the possibility of others’ experiences parting company with
our own in ways that mundane empathy is oblivious to. In the context of this stance,
one might well draw upon first-person experiences and imaginative variations of
them, but this does not account for the other-directed attitude that makes it a form of
empathy or, for that matter, the appreciation of a variable and ordinarily presupposed
sense of belonging to a world that makes it a \textit{distinctive} form of empathy.

It is also important to stress that one can appreciate something through radical
empathy without being able to offer a clear, detailed account of what one has grasped
or how one came to do so. It is possible to perform the phenomenological reduction
without being able to characterise the achievement as such. This is exemplified by
numerous works of literature. For example, the passage I quoted from Shriver (2006)
can be construed as incorporating an appreciation of our changeable sense of reality and belonging, but without explicitly describing it in those terms. Similarly, many first-person accounts of psychiatric illness refer to loss of a world that people more usually take for granted. An account I quoted from earlier goes on to describe the predicament as having lost “life itself”, a “habitable earth”. What has been lost is “something that people don’t even know is”, which is why “it’s so hard to explain” (Hornstein, 2009, pp.2012-13). This is something the person seeks to communicate; he recognises that people’s sense of belonging to a world can differ in this profound and often unacknowledged way. So, although radical empathy is surely less common than more mundane forms of empathy, I do at least want to maintain that it sometimes features in everyday interpersonal experience, rather than being something that is tied exclusively to a form of explicit philosophical enquiry. 

VI. Perception, Interaction and Empathy

One might take the sceptical line that the kind of empathetic achievement I have described here is simply impossible; one cannot engage empathetically with ways of belonging to the world that fall outside of one’s own modal space. But, rather than just describing the relevant achievement, I have offered examples of forms of experience that can be understand in that way and, by implication, illustrated that such an understanding is possible. In addition, I have not claimed that the other person’s modal space need be entirely different from one’s own, just different in some respects. And I would not want to maintain that radical empathy is without limits; even with its aid, most or all of us might be constitutionally incapable of empathising with certain forms of experience. Once we have accepted that radical empathy is possible, there is a lot more to be said about how it is achieved. At least part of the story, I suggest, concerns the way in which it is self-affecting. As illustrated by the various examples considered in Section V, the other person need not be present in order for us to empathise with her experience. (Indeed, she need not exist - we can also empathise with fictional characters.) However, there are important differences between employing radical empathy (and empathy more generally) when engaging with a text and when engaging with a person who is perceptually present. I want to suggest that, in the latter case, radical empathy, like the kind of empathy described by Stein (1989) and Zahavi (2010), can have a perceptual aspect to it. This is closely associated with a ‘self-transformative’ aspect, something that is most pronounced in
those cases where one both perceives and interacts with the other person, although it is present in other cases too.

Radical empathy might seem a far cry from perceptual empathy. Surely, one does not perceive anything of the alien world that the other person inhabits. Rather, one resorts to some sort of imaginative reconstruction. However, I want to suggest otherwise. Radical empathy shares something with interpersonal experience more generally: it is self-affecting. Many phenomenologists hold the view that interpersonal experience centrally involves an experience of possibility and, more specifically, a sense of the potential for certain kinds of self-transformative interaction (see, for example, van den Berg, 1972; Sartre, 1989; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Levinas, 1969). Sartre (1989, Part 3, Chapter 1) famously construes this in terms of losing one’s world to the other. The world ceases to be a realm of possibilities to be actualised through one’s own activities and instead takes the form of his world, where one becomes an object situated in the context of his projects. But not all interpersonal experience is like that. Consider reading a bedtime story to a young child, where you appreciate that he is fond of the book but you find it terribly boring. Once you begin reading it, a kind of affective and gestural dialogue can begin. You read a sentence loudly, exaggerating various words in a humorous way. He giggles and points excitedly at a picture on the page. Soon, the fact that the book is boring no longer features in your experience. The interaction reshapes your experience of the world. You do not simply understand the child’s experience; you are affected by it. In addition, it is an ‘us’ who experience the book together; you share in his joy, his enthusiasm. There is still a sense of his experience as distinct from yours; not everything appears as ‘ours’. However, the ability to be affected by him and to share a common experience of the book enhances your appreciation of experiences that you do recognise as his and his alone, rather than as yours or as shared. Thus, it is in the context of self-affecting interaction that you come to empathise with the child.

Radical empathy, like empathy more generally, incorporates a stance of openness to others, a willingness to be affected by them, to have one’s own experience shaped by them. One might adopt a stance of this kind when engaging with a text. But radical empathy can also involve face-to-face interaction. And, when it does, empathetic understanding can be partly constituted by how one perceives the other person.
Eugene Minkowski’s book *Lived Time* includes some good illustrations of this. Minkowski explicitly advocates a second-person phenomenological method that involves interacting with another person for a lengthy period of time. Empathy is achieved, in part, by letting oneself be affected by him and by reflecting upon how one has been affected. Minkowski offers the intriguing example of being struck, when with a particular patient, by the thought “I know all about him” (1970, p.176). We do not usually experience others as exhausted by what is available to our own perspective, but instead as loci of *possibility* that are – by definition – not completely known. It is, he says, “precisely this source, insofar as it is unknown, which constitutes the common basis of our relationships with other human beings and makes them, in an immediate way, our equals”. How is one to understand the odd sense that another person is an open book, the feeling that the “psyche of the patient is too well understood”? Upon further reflection, the patient’s world becomes clearer. He experiences the future as a “hostile force” and nothing else. So he is not open to possibilities and instead inhabits a fixed past. Consequently, “we, confronted by this psyche, flattened and reduced to a single dimension, have the impression, in listening to the patient speak, of being constrained to read an open book, as if there were nothing behind the pages of that book” (1970, pp.177-9). The book is open because it is complete; the patient no longer lives in a world of open possibilities but in a realm that is already actualised. In order to understand this, a great deal of interpretation is required. But we start with a distinctive kind of attitude. It does not involve replicating the patient’s experience. Instead, interaction with the person makes one feel a certain way, and that first-person feeling *is* at the same time a presentation of his experience as somehow incomplete, lacking. It differs from how the patient himself experiences his world, but it is does incorporate a degree of experiential insight into what that world is like, and is thus an instance of empathy. This initial insight is then built upon by Minkowski, in a way that refrains from taking the usual sense of belonging to the world for granted, thus enabling an appreciation that the patient inhabits a realm of diminished possibilities.

It might be objected that what we are presented with in such cases is someone we cannot understand, *cannot empathise with*. However, even where there is a sense of *not being unable to understand* another person, there can remain a degree of empathy, at least in Stein’s sense of the term. Take the ‘praecox feeling’ that some people
report experiencing when relating to schizophrenia patients, a feeling of the other person as somehow different and alien. Although this does not amount to a positive appreciation of the person’s experience, it is still – I suggest – an empathetic achievement, in so far as one experiences her as radically different from oneself in some way. Peter Hobson reports sometimes feeling something similar when interacting with autistic people:

A person can feel that there is something missing when relating to someone who is autistic – it is as if one is in the presence of a changeling, someone from a different world – but this escapes the net of scientific methods. (2002, p.49)

Feelings like this incorporate, I suggest, some appreciation of the other person as not open to interpersonal possibilities in the usual way, of her inhabiting a modal space that differs from one’s own. Hence empathy need not amount to ‘fellow feeling’.21

VII. Conclusions
What I have sketched in this paper is both a way of understanding others and, when it is made explicit, a way of doing phenomenology. The kind of second-person understanding enabled by radical empathy is something that most accounts of interpersonal experience and understanding omit altogether. Take, for instance, the various ‘theory’ and ‘simulation’ theories that are currently popular in philosophy of mind and cognitive science. The explanandum for such approaches is the other person construed as a distinctive type of worldly object, one that is guided by complicated internal mechanisms that we cannot perceive. It is proposed that we have some kind of mechanism dedicated to the task of understanding those mechanisms, thus facilitating interpersonal prediction and explanation.22 The sense of belonging to a shared world is not even acknowledged as a psychological achievement, let alone one that sometimes poses a challenge for interpersonal understanding. This lacuna is equally evident in the kind of third-person phenomenological approach that Dennett (1991) calls ‘heterphenomenology’, where first-person descriptions of experience are treated as fictional narratives that are ultimately to be accounted for in non-phenomenological, third-person terms supplied by the heterophenomenologist.
This fictional world is populated with all the images, events, sounds, smells, hunches, presentiments, and feelings that the subject (apparently) sincerely believes to exist in his or her (or its) stream of consciousness. Maximally extended, it is a neutral portrayal of exactly what it is like to be that subject – in the subject’s own terms, given the best interpretation we can muster. (Dennett, 1991, p.98)

Whatever else one might say about such an approach, its explanandum is incomplete in one crucial respect. Even if one wishes to construe human experience as a fictional narrative, it is important to start off with the full story. Our phenomenology incorporates much that is not specific to interpreter or interpreted, much that is not experienced as ‘mine’ in contrast to ‘yours’ or vice versa but taken for granted as shared. Important aspects of our experience are therefore eclipsed by an exclusive focus upon what a person attributes to herself as opposed to others. Radical empathy, in contrast, involves suspending the world that heterophenomenology and other approaches take for granted as a backdrop to interpretation. In the process, the sense of belonging to a shared world comes to light as a phenomenological achievement, one that is prone to considerable variation in structure. It thus reveals a realm of interpersonal difference that otherwise eludes us.23

References
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Mental Simulation, pp.60-73 (Oxford: Blackwell).


1 Other contexts where experiential changes of the kind that I address may occur include somatic illness, trauma, bereavement, childbirth, and mystical experience, amongst others. But I focus principally upon psychiatric illness here.

2 From a letter by a woman with melancholic depression, quoted by Whybrow (1997, p.23).

3 The phenomenologist and psychiatrist J. H. van den Berg remarks – correctly, in my view - that “loneliness is the nucleus of psychiatry” (1972, p.105).

4 Jaspers (1962, p.98) famously declares that certain delusional experiences are simply “beyond our understanding”, meaning that we will never be able to empathise with them. In this paper, I do not discuss delusions. However, I would want to maintain that radical empathy has the potential to extend the reach of phenomenological understanding here too. See, for example, Sass (e.g. 1994) for an approach to delusions that complements my discussion.

5 I refer to this as ‘second-person’ rather than ‘third-person’ engagement because, as will become clear in Section VI, it is better characterised as an experience of a ‘you’ than of a ‘she’, ‘he’ or ‘it’. As I will further emphasise in the concluding section, it differs markedly from the kind of third-person phenomenological approach that Dennett (1991) calls ‘heterophenomenology’.

6 Non-conscious or ‘sub-personal’ matching processes in the brain are, some claim, ubiquitous; they occur whenever we perceive another person’s behaviour, and facilitate a quasi-perceptual appreciation of that behaviour as expressive of experience. The discovery of so-called “mirror neurons” is frequently cited as evidence. For further discussion of mirror neurons, see Ratcliffe (2007, Chapter 5).

7 I use the term ‘perception’ in a fairly non-committal way here, to imply absence of conscious inference from observed behaviour to mental states. In so far as one experiences the behaviour, one experiences it as meaningful; there is no intervening step. Whether or not this is ‘perception’ in the same sense as ‘sensory perception’ depends, in part, on what we take perceptual content to consist of. Phenomenological claims to the effect that there is “direct perception” of experience in behaviour (e.g. Zahavi, 2010) would thus benefit from engagement with debates in the philosophy of mind concerning the nature of perception and the kinds of content that perceptual experience encompasses. See, for example, Hawley and MacPherson eds. (2011) for some recent discussions of perceptual content.

8 We find much the same view in Scheler (1954, pp.10-11).

9 Robert Gordon (e.g. 1995, p.55) offers an account of what he calls ‘radical simulation’, which is fairly close to this. For Gordon, one not only imagines what one would do in someone else’s situation; one also imagines what that person would do, something that requires an experienced “egocentric shift” to her perspective upon the world, rather than a process of inference. However, Gordon construes this egocentric shift as a relocation of the first-person perspective from oneself to the other person, whereas I focus upon something different: a second-person appreciation of their experience as theirs,
which does not require resigning one’s first-person perspective in the process. Even if the kinds of feats described by Gordon actually occur, they are not what I refer to as ‘empathy’.

10 In order to achieve an empathetic appreciation of someone from a very different background, we also need to build up a positive understanding of the norms and so forth that she does subscribe to. Gallagher (forthcoming) argues that empathy is ordinarily facilitated by ‘shared narratives’, which play a similar role to what I have referred to as a context of norms, roles and artefact functions. When we try to empathise with someone who is not immersed in the same narrative context as ourselves, we need to get to know her narratives, which enable us to appreciate her history and her situation.

11 Of course, the theme of tool use and practical utility is also developed by Heidegger (1962, Division One, III).

12 Much the same themes are later developed by Merleau-Ponty, who similarly conceives of the world as the “horizon of all horizons”, and stresses that it is inextricable from the body, construed as an integrated system of habitual tendencies (1962, p.330).

13 Radical empathy therefore serves to challenge Heidegger’s claim in Being and Time that “only on the basis of Being-in-the-world does empathy become possible” (1962, p.112). Radical empathy does not take for granted the structure that Heidegger calls “Being-in-the-world”; it involves grasping the possibility of variations in that structure.

14 Sheets-Johnstone (2007) suggests that schizophrenia can involve something like this.

15 As this might suggest, depression is often twinned with a form of anxiety. It is not simply that one anticipates however many specific events in the mode of ‘threat’. Instead, threat becomes the form of the future; it offers nothing else. For example, Minkowski (1970, p.188) describes a predicament where the usual orientation towards the future is lost and “the whole of becoming seems to rush toward us, a hostile force which must bring suffering”. Such experiences cannot be understood unless we first acknowledge the aspect of experience that is affected. Hence a phenomenological stance is indispensable.

16 See Sass (1992; 1994; 2004; 2007) for a sophisticated phenomenological account of these changes.

17 A range of other experiential changes are equally amenable to interpretation in terms of an altered possibility space. For instance, there is depersonalisation, which occurs (perhaps in different forms) in depression and schizophrenia, but is also increasingly recognised as a disorder in its own right (Simeon and Abugel, 2006; Medford et al., 2005). It is characterised by anomalous bodily feelings and an altered or diminished experience of self. Closely associated is a sense of being disconnected from everything and of unreality. The perceived world “may appear somehow artificial – as if ‘painted, not natural’, or ‘two-dimensional’ or ‘as if everyone is acting out a role on stage, and I’m just a spectator’” (Medford et al., 2005, p.93). What is it for something to ‘look artificial’? One plausible interpretation, in my view, is that it is experienced as lacking the kinds of practical possibility ordinarily associated with an entity of that type. It thus looks somehow fake.

18 For example, C.S. Lewis, in an autobiographical account of profound grief following the death of his wife, writes of visiting places that they used to frequent: “it makes no difference. Her absence is no
more emphatic in those places than anywhere else. It’s not local at all. [...] The act of living is different all through. Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything” (1966, p.12).

Regardless of whether or not one is able to characterise the relevant achievement, radical empathy can involve varying degrees of effort. One might set out to empathise with a person and draw upon various imaginative resources in order to do so. In contrast, it might simply ‘happen’, at least to some degree, without prior intention or effort.

An exchange between Sass (2003) and Read (2003) can be plausibly interpreted as a disagreement over whether or not radical empathy is possible. While Sass adopts a phenomenological approach that accepts the possibility of what I call ‘radical empathy’, Read’s position, which is inspired by a reading of Wittgenstein, does not.

A loss of ‘openness’ to others characterises many form of psychiatric illness. For instance, people with depression may complain of being impervious to others, irrevocably isolated from them. A sense of inhabiting a shared world can be diminished or altered in other ways too. Jaspers (1962, pp.63-4) draws attention to various “failures of empathy”, which involve changes in the structure of interpersonal experience and relations. One of the things that we can seek to recognise, through radical empathy, is alteration in the structure of empathy, impoverishment of interpersonal experience.

See Ratcliffe (2007, Chapters 1 and 8) for further discussion of this kind of view.

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