

**This is an electronic reprint of the original article.
This reprint *may differ* from the original in pagination and typographic detail.**

Author(s): Ruonakoski, Erika

Title: The Object and Limits of Empathy in Stein's Philosophy

Year: 2017

Version:

Please cite the original version:

Ruonakoski, E. (2017). The Object and Limits of Empathy in Stein's Philosophy. In H. Tuorila-Kahanpää (Ed.), *Celebrating Teresa of Avila and Edith Stein : two seminars organised by the Secular Order of the Teresian Carmel in Helsinki in 2015 and 2016* (pp. 25-38). OCDS Finland.

All material supplied via JYX is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of the repository collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone who is not an authorised user.

In *Celebrating Teresa of Avila and Edith Stein: Two Seminars Organised by the Secular Order of the Teresian Carmel in Helsinki in 2015 and 2016*, Helsinki: OCDS (2017), ed. Heidi Tuorila-Kahanpää OCDS, 25–38.

[p. 25]

The Object and Limits of Empathy in Stein's Philosophy

Erika Ruonakoski

1. Introduction

Edith Stein wrote her dissertation *On the Problem of Empathy* (*Zum Problem der Einfühlung*, 1917)¹ in order to investigate the relationship of the embodied subject to foreign consciousness. In a way, this point of departure already delineates foreign consciousness as the object of empathy, which again would lead to an identification of the limits of empathy with the limits of conscious life, whatever that may be. This is indeed Stein's basic assumption, which distinguishes her philosophy from the empathy theories of German aestheticians such as Theodor Lipps, and associates it closely with the phenomenology of her teacher, Edmund Husserl. I argue, however, that this choice is not completely unproblematic because it diminishes the significance of lived participation in the other's experience and produces a category of "quasi-empathy".

I start by examining the historical background of Stein's thesis and particularly its relationship to Husserl's philosophy. After that I describe her analysis of empathy in more detail, presenting her examples of empathy pertaining to the other's body position, joy and pain. I also discuss the experiences of non-human animals and the vigour and sluggishness of plants – a limit case for Stein – as examples of possible objects of empathy. Lastly, I indicate some problems in Stein's theory of empathy and highlight its lasting significance for phenomenology.

2. Husserl and Stein: The Question of Influence

That Husserl (1859–1938) had a great influence on Stein's philosophical development is evident, but whether and how Stein's ideas are reflected in Husserl's published works is less clear, not least because Stein was Husserl's student and assistant. Stein's autobiography reveals a determined young

¹ Stein's dissertation *Das Einfühlungsproblem in seiner historischen Entwicklung und in phänomenologischer Betrachtung* was published only in part, under the title *Zum Problem der Einfühlung*.

woman who, once infected with a desire to learn more about phenomenology, did not hesitate to switch from the University of Breslau to Göttingen to study with Husserl, nor to ask for permission to start an ambitious doctoral thesis on the problem of empathy. Later she herself suggested that she could be Husserl's assistant, and when the task proved unrewarding she left the job on her own initiative. [p. 26] Despite the blatant gender discrimination that prevailed in the German academic world, and Husserl's and later Martin Heidegger's reluctance to endorse her, Stein worked hard to get *Habilitation*, which would have secured her academic career. This did not happen, but it can be said to Stein's benefit that even though she suffered major setbacks in her academic pursuits, she did not give up easily but campaigned for women's right to habilitate in philosophy, thus effectively bringing about a law change the results of which unfortunately remained theoretical in her own case. (Stein 2016, 217–218, 268–269, 411; Calcagno 2007, 12–13.)

Stein's interest in the topic of empathy was kindled when Husserl mentioned it briefly in one of his lectures. Prefiguring the theme of *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl had suggested that one's experience of other individuals was a prerequisite for objectivity. Husserl called this experience, which had other living beings and their experiences as its object, *Einfühlung* (empathy). In other words he adopted the term employed by Lipps and other German aestheticians in their discussions of art and intersubjectivity. As Husserl did not describe empathy in any detail, Stein felt there was "a lacuna to be filled" – and that this filling could be done in the form of a doctoral dissertation. Husserl agreed that the research topic would be a good one, insisting however that Stein engage in an analytical dialogue with Lipps. (Stein 2016, 296.)

The task of comparing Lipps' views with Husserl's vague indications of how he understood empathy proved to be a demanding one, for Stein found these two to have little in common. According to Stein, her discussions with Husserl, or rather his monologues, did not help her much, nor did she find relevant information in his lectures. (Stein 2016, 277.)

The concept of empathy was, and indeed still is, a slippery one, obscured by a multitude of different definitions and a diversity of theoretical points of departure that discuss it. Already in 1913 the phenomenologist Max Scheler (1874–1928), another teacher of Stein's, rejected the concept of empathy, introducing however the concept of *Nachfühlung*, which in its content is very close to Stein's and Husserl's concept of *Einfühlung*. Husserl did use the term *Einfühlung*, but as Dan Zahavi points out, especially in his later writings he preferred the term *Fremderfahrung* (Zahavi 2014, 114).

How close is then Stein's understanding of empathy to Husserl's? Some commentators have suggested that it is, in fact, very close, so much so that *The Problem of Empathy* would be a reliable guide to Husserl's thinking at the time [p. 27] on the question of empathy (Moran 2006, 176). Stein's dissertation has without doubt acquired a part of its readership precisely because of such assumptions

and because Husserl himself, who was very slow to publish anything, did not provide a work that exhaustively described his views on empathy.

Husserl discussed empathy most extensively in *Cartesian Meditations* (1931) and *Ideas II* (*Ideas pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book*, 1952). *Cartesian Meditations* describes empathy as a condition for objectivity, in other words in the light of the theme he briefly mentioned in his lectures on nature and spirit, lectures which Stein attended. This discussion is fairly abstract however, and addresses a question different from Stein's. There is more overlap between Husserl's posthumously published *Ideas II* and Stein's dissertation. In her foreword to *The Problem of Empathy* she admits that the statement of the problem and the method of her work grew "entirely out of intellectual stimuli received from Professor Husserl", but she also emphasises that she read his manuscript only after submitting her dissertation to the faculty and that the results of the dissertation were obtained by her own efforts, a view that is in harmony with what she tells in her autobiography. (Stein 1989, 2; 1917, vi.)

According to Stein, Husserl admitted that her dissertation anticipated some material that would be published in *Ideas II* (Stein 2016, 411). Whether this means that Husserl benefited from Stein's work, or that they developed their works at the same time but without having a significant exchange of thoughts, except for Husserl's initial influence as Stein's teacher, remains an open question. Nonetheless, as one of the editors of *Ideas II*, Stein left her mark on this work of Husserl's.

To sum up, despite the hierarchical teacher–student setting and Husserl's relative distance to Stein, there was some reciprocity.² Stein did not faithfully reproduce her "Master's" views but developed her own theory of empathy, also discussing the ideas of Scheler and Lipps among others. Unfortunately the first [p. 28] chapter that describes the history of the concept of empathy was left out of her published dissertation because of financial reasons. This chapter has not been preserved for posterity. For this reason Stein's critique of Lipps, for instance, is missing a vital part.

3. Empathy and Its Object

What is empathy? In everyday discussions it is often understood as putting oneself in the position of the other, or seeing things "with the other's eyes". Nevertheless the term *Einfühlung* had a wider use

² In his letter to Daniel Feuling, Husserl emphasises that Stein was only a beginner when she was his assistant and that he never exchanged ideas with her to the same extent as he did with his later assistant Eugen Fink. Husserl was hesitant about the idea of women making a career in the academia, and it is perhaps telling of his friendly but somewhat patronising attitude towards Stein that, to commend her dissertation, he called her "a very gifted little girl". (Husserl 1994, 89; Stein 2016, 251, 411. See also Tuorila-Kahanpää 2003, 54.)

in 19th- century German aesthetics where it had its origin. For these aestheticians not only the experiences of other human beings but also works of art and natural objects could be objects of *Einfühlung* or empathy. Robert Vischer, who was the first to use the words *Einfühlung* and *einfühlen* (to empathise), referred with them to “feeling-in something”, in other words, to feeling something in, for instance, a painting or another human being (Mallgrave and Ikonomou 1994, 22–23, 71n64).³ Phenomenologists, however, have used the concept of empathy primarily to discuss the relationship to other embodied consciousnesses, that is, to foreign experience.

In the beginning of her book, Stein likewise states that her basic question is the question of empathy as the experiencing (*Erfahrung*) of foreign subjects and their lived experience (*Erleben*) (1989, 1; 1917, v). She describes empathy with the help of the distinction between primordial (*originär*) and non-primordial (*nicht-originär*) experience. An experience can be primordial because it is I who experience it. All my present experiences are primordial in this way, be they perceptions, fantasies, memories or experiences of empathy. Secondly, the content of an experience can be primordial. When I feel joyful, my experience of joy is primordial in both senses: it is I who experience it and it is my present joy that I experience. However my memory of joy is non-primordial in the sense that the remembered joy is not primordially present to me now, even though it was in the past. In other words, it is non-primordial in content. In a like manner, when I empathise with the other’s experience, let us say with the other’s joy, my experience is primordial in the sense that I am now having this experience of empathy. However, the content of the experience, the other’s joy, is given to me non-primordially. (Stein 1989, 7–11; 1917, 5–10.)

In these two experiences, my memory of my own joy and my empathy with the other’s joy, the subject of the joy is different: I, who empathise, am not the [p. 29] subject of the empathised experience, whereas I, who remember being joyful, am the subject of the remembered experience. The subject of the empathised experience is the other. (Stein 1989, 10–11; 1917, 10.) According to Stein, when I empathise with the other, it is as if the other’s experience guided me:

In my non-primordial experience I feel, as it were, led by a primordial one not experienced by me but still there, manifesting itself in my non-primordial experience.⁴ (Stein 1989, 11.)

Due to the specific relationship between the experience of the other and one’s own experience, Stein describes empathy as its own kind of act of experiencing (*eine Art erfahrender Akte sui generis*)

³ According to Vischer’s theory of projection, the perceiver’s ‘mental-sensory ego’ is projected inside the perceived object (Mallgrave and Ikonomou 1994, 22– 23, 71n64).

⁴ *In meinem nicht-originären Erleben fühle ich mich gleichsam geleitet von einem originären, das nicht von mir erlebt und doch da ist, sich in meinem nicht-originären bekundet.* (Stein 1917, 10.)

(1989, 11; 1917, 10). The other's experience, not directly accessible to me as such but expressed by the other's living body, guides my experience.

4. Embodiment and Empathy

A better understanding of Stein's view of empathy requires that we examine its foundation in embodiment. As she appears to follow Husserl's description of embodiment rather faithfully (see Stein 1989, 4; 1917, 47), I will discuss it in some detail. First of all, Husserl argues that one's own body is not experienced as any other object in the world but as a centre or zero-point (*Nullpunkt*) of orientation to the world. This body is the point in reference to which all other objects have a location: they are up or down, far away or near, depending on the location of my body. I cannot get outside this point, which is the point of departure for all my perceptions. It is also impossible to exclude one's body totally from one's consciousness. It is always in the background of my perceptions. What is more, I cannot objectify my body completely. (Husserl 1950b, 128; 1952, 158–159. See also Stein 1989, 42; 1917, 45.) For instance, I cannot see my eyes or my back without devices such as the mirror or a video camera.

Echoing Husserl, Stein states that the living body is at the zero-point of orientation to the spatial world. This body moves freely and is constructed of moving organs. What is more, the living body is expressive: it expresses the experience and will of its "I". (Stein 1989, 57; 1917, 64.) [p. 30]

Husserl argues that the living bodies of others appear as equivalent zero-points of orientation to the perceiving subject, even though not in the same primordial manner as one's own. In empathy, one's own body sets itself as a pair to the other's body, and experiences the other, likewise, as oriented to the world. (Husserl 1950, 140; 1952, 164.) In tune with Husserl, Stein points out that just as it is a part of seeing physical objects that they are "perceived" as having another, unseen side, another's body is similarly co-given as having fields of sensation. In other words, the other's body is "seen" as a living, sensing body. But while a cup's other side can be turned towards us to examine, the other's sensations cannot be made visible in the same manner. Only empathic understanding is possible. (Stein 1989, 57; 1917, 64.)

What happens then in practice when we experience empathy? In one of Stein's examples, the perceiver perceives another human being whose hand touches the table:

The hand resting on the table does not lie there like the book beside it. It "presses" against the table more or less strongly; it lies there limp or stretched; and I "see" these sensations of pressure and tension in a con-primordial way. When I follow out the tendencies to fulfilment in this "co-comprehension", my hand is moved (not in reality, but "as if") to the place of the foreign one. It is moved into it and occupies

its position and attitude, now feeling its sensations, though not primordially and not as being its own. Rather, my own hand feels the foreign hand's sensation "with", precisely through the empathy whose nature we earlier differentiated from our own experience and every other kind of representation.⁵ (Stein 1989, 58.)

In other words, experiencing empathy does not entail confusion between the other's situation and one's own, or between the other's hand and one's own. The other's hand still manifests itself as something that belongs to the other's physical body, not to one's own. Nor does the perceiver experience that her hand would have actually moved onto the table. According to Stein, [p. 31] empathetic sensations always involve a certain foreignness, they are kinds of "as if" sensations in comparison to the sensations linked to one's own movements and positions. (Stein 1989, 58; 1917, 65.)

In the example given, the perceiver experiences empathetic sensations that have to do with the other person's body position. Nevertheless, empathy does not, according to Stein, always presuppose that I as a perceiver would experience the same or similar things as the other. To clarify this, she discusses a situation in which one is too sad to participate in the other's joy, even if one understands the other's joy empathetically. She sees empathetic joy as possible, however, and claims that it ideally has the same content as the comprehended joy. (Stein 1989, 14–15; 1917, 14–15.)

At this point Stein differentiates empathy from sympathy: unlike the experience of empathy, that of sympathy is characterised by primordially. When one sympathises with the other's joy, one understands the other's joy empathetically, but at the same time one experiences a joy of one's own, inspired by the happy occasion and the other's joy. (Stein 1989, 14–15; 1917, 14–15; cf. Scheler 1926, 4–5, 10.) It can be asked, however, if it is possible to tell when an empathetic joy turns into a sympathetic one. Stein does not discuss this question.

With the help of another example Stein examines empathy with the other's pain. In philosophy pain is often an example of a particularly private experience: my pain is not as such perceivable by the other, even though he can perceive my lowered brows, wrinkled nose and open mouth. He does not strictly speaking experience my pain and does not necessarily even know, where in my body I sense pain. Stein writes:

⁵ The translation has been slightly altered. *Die Hand, die auf dem Tische ruht, liegt nicht da wie das Buch daneben, sie „drückt“ sich gegen den Tisch (und zwar mehr oder weniger stark), sie liegt schlaff oder gestreckt da, und ich „sehe“ diese Druck- oder Spannungsempfindung in der Weise der Konoriginarität; indem ich den Erfüllungstendenzen nachgehe, die in diesem „Miterfassen“ liegen, schiebt sich meine Hand (nicht realiter, sondern „gleichsam“) an die Stelle der fremden, in sie hinein, nimmt ihre Lage und Haltung ein und empfindet nun ihre Empfindungen – nicht originär und nicht als eigen, sondern „mit“, genau in der Weise der Einfühlung, deren Wesen wir früher gegenüber dem eigenen Erleben und jeder andern Art der Vergegenwärtigung abgegrenzt haben.* (Stein 1917, 65.)

When I empathise the pain of the injured in looking at the wound, I tend to look at his face to have my experience confirmed in his expression of suffering.⁶ (Stein 1989, 84.)

This example would seem to imply that we can empathise with the other's pain at the moment we recognise that he is wounded. However if the person is in shock or has a strong pain medication, he may not experience pain. As we saw, Stein states that in cases like this one turns to look at the face of the wounded: does it express pain? She continues:

Should I instead perceive a cheerful or peaceful countenance, I would say to myself that he must not really be having pain, for pain in its meaning [p. 32] motivates unhappy feelings visible in an expression. Further testing that consists of new acts of empathy and possible inferences based on them can also lead me to another correction: the sensual feeling is indeed present but its expression is voluntarily repressed; or perhaps this person certainly feels the pain but, because his feeling is perverted, he does not suffer from it but enjoys it.⁷ (Stein 1989, 84–85.)

In other words, the empathic understanding proceeds as a self-correcting process, informed by the other's expressions and their context. Stein's other example of this topic is blushing, which may occur either because of anger or because of shame. If the blushing person has just presented a silly remark, her blushing will be interpreted as shame. (Stein 1989, 85; 1917, 96.) Bodily expressions display also a unity which facilitates their understanding. Stein takes expressions of anger and joy as her examples:

An outburst of anger is an intelligible, meaningful whole within which all single moments become intelligible to me, including those unfamiliar up to that point. For example, I can understand a furious laugh. Thus, too, I can understand the tail-wagging of a dog as an expression of joy if its appearance and its behaviour otherwise disclose such feelings and its situation warrants them.⁸ (Stein 1989, 85–86.)

⁶ *Wenn ich beim Anblick einer Wunde dem Verletzten Schmerz einfühle, so pflege ich ihm ins Gesicht zu sehen, um durch den Ausdruck des Leidens meine Erfahrung bestätigen zu lassen.* (Stein 1917, 96.)

⁷ *Gewahre ich statt dessen eine heitere oder gleichmütige Miene, so sage ich mir, daß er wohl doch keine Schmerzen haben muß, denn Schmerzen motivieren ihrem Sinne nach unlustvolle Gefühle, die in einem Ausdruck sichtbar werden. Weitere Prüfung (bestehend in neuen Einfühlungsakten und ev. darauf gebauten Schlüssen) kann ich mich auch zu einer anderen Korrektur führen: daß zwar das sinnliche Gefühl vorhanden, aber sein Ausdruck willkürlich zurückgehalten ist, oder daß der Betreffende wohl den Schmerz empfindet, aber infolge einer Perversion seines Fühlens nicht daran leidet, sondern ihn genießt.* (Stein 1917, 96.)

⁸ *Ein Zornesausbruch ist ein verständliches Sinnganzes, innerhalb dessen mir alle einzelnen Momente verständlich werden, auch die bis dahin unbekanntes, z.B. ein wütendes Lachen. So wird mir auch das Schweifwedeln des Hundes verständlicher Ausdruck der Freude, wenn sein Blick und sein sonstiges Gehaben solche Gefühle verrät und seine Situation dergleichen rechtfertigt.* (Stein 1917, 97.)

In other words, we cannot isolate the meaning of laughter from all the expressive components that surround it: now the laughter is expressive of anger and contempt, at another moment it expresses joy or a willingness to please. Conversely, an expression for which I have no equivalent in my own body, such as the movement of an animal's tail, can be understood empathetically as positive in its expressive unity: the facial expression of the dog is non-threatening, its whole body moves in an enthusiastic manner, it actively seeks contact with me, and the context of the expression is a reunion. The case is different, when [p. 33] a cat swishes its tail, sitting still, clearly not seeking contact: the movement of the tail may be expressive of irritation. Of course, in the case of non-human animals, especially of those of which we have little experience, our empathetic understanding may often be deficient, and we can be almost blind to some of the communicative nuances of the animal's tail movements.⁹ Here we approach the question of the limits of empathy.

5. The Limits of Empathy

On the basis of the previous example it would appear that Stein, for whom foreign consciousness is the object of empathy, sees the consciousnesses of non-human animals also as objects of empathy. What kind of consciousnesses they might manifest is not a question Stein discusses at depth, but whether we examine non-human animals from the perspective of phenomenology or from the point of view of current empirical research, it does not seem too far-fetched to suggest that mammals such as dogs have at least a pre-reflective awareness and a pre-reflective self-awareness as well as many kinds of feelings (see, e.g. Zahavi 2000, 69; Ruonakoski 2011, 70–71; Balcombe 2006). For Stein, however, the conscious life of other human beings is the primary object of human empathy. In her view, one's ability to empathise with the other depends on how close its body type is to our own. If, for instance, a dog has hurt its paw, a human being is able to sense-in pain. On the other hand, some of the dog's movements and body positions are such that no empathic fulfilment is possible. (Stein 1989, 59; 1917, 66.)

According to Stein, one's physical body is not given as a fixed type but "as an accidental realisation of a type that is variable within definite limits" (1989, 59; 1917, 66). A woman's hand differs from a child's hand and from a man's hand, but she can still empathise with these somewhat different hands,

⁹ A. Quaranta, M. Siniscalchi and G. Vallortigara demonstrate that the tail wagging of dogs exhibits a right-sided bias, when they are faced with their owner, and a left-sided bias, when they are faced with an unfamiliar dog (2007). In other words, the movements of the tail appear to have different meanings in the respective cases. This example shows that many nuances of the behaviour of non-human animals may go unnoticed by humans. What Stein says about the unity of meaning still holds, however.

for they belong to the same type, the human type. The further one moves from the human type, the fewer the possibilities for empathy become.

This idea of Stein's can be put to test by comparing one's experiences of humans, other mammals such as dogs, and insects and spiders. Yet even if a dog represents a body type different from mine, this does not mean that I would [p. 34] not be able to empathise with it at all, as Stein's descriptions of a dog's joy and pain suggest.¹⁰ (See Stein 1989, 59; 1917, 66.)

In fact, Stein's description of the possibilities of empathy pertaining to different body types resembles Lipps' view according to which the depth of the experienced empathy is related to how much the animal looks like us and how much its movements resemble ours (Lipps 1903, 112–114, 159–160). As we have mentioned however, Lipps thought that one can empathise even with works of art and natural objects.

Stein does discuss the possibility of empathising also with beings that differ from humans even more than insects, namely plants. Instead of claiming that one cannot empathise with plants at all, she presents them as limit cases. According to her, we can “see” in them general feelings (*Gemeingefühle*) such as growth, development, sickness, health, vigour and sluggishness. In her view, empathetic fulfilment is possible with the general feelings of plants, but this does not mean that an “awake” I could be ascribed to the plant, not to mention reflective consciousness. Whether plants actually sense is in Stein's view questionable, even though some phenomena pertaining to plants resemble, for instance, sensing light. (Stein 1989, 68–69, 69n93; 1917, 77–78, 78n1.)

Stein does not consider plants as centres of orientation to the spatial world. Even so, she analyses the movements of plants, arguing that not all plant movements are mechanical in the sense of being caused by exterior forces like the wind. Plants orient towards light, for instance, by growing or turning their leaves. (Stein 1989, 68–69, 68n91; 1917, 76–78, 76n2.)

To make a short detour to contemporary discussions of plant consciousness, some researchers in “neurobiology of plants” suggest that plants have an ability to observe, to remember and to communicate and that they demonstrate an intelligence and awareness. (See, e.g., Baluška, Mancuso and Volkmann 2006.) Philosophically speaking, the most essential question is whether plants can be said to manifest consciousness, motivation, reciprocity and orientation to the surrounding world in the same sense as mammals can, or whether they manifest similar “memory”, “power of observation” and “intelligence” as the functioning of our organs such as liver or kidneys, which we do not

¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out that one would hardly be driven to discuss the state of a drowning fly philosophically, as Spinoza does, unless one already perceived in the fly something more than a fragment of extension or a machine (Merleau-Ponty 1990, 137).

acknowledge in our everyday lives as long as they work properly. As far as I can see, plants can very well react, for instance, to the chemical signals [p. 35] emitted by other individuals of the same species, but this does not mean that they would manifest an ability to sense things in an experiential manner any more than my white blood cells manifest any consciousness of their task to destroy harmful bacteria that penetrate my body. A plant does manifest a kind of slow orientation towards its surroundings, however, unlike an inanimate object. Certainly the discussion of plant movements and reactions is intriguing, but for the time being Stein's cautiousness in attributing awareness to plants appears warranted.

As Stein's discussion of plant movements already implies, in her view spontaneous, alive, inwardly motivated movements elicit acts of empathy. Mechanical, associated movements, on the other hand, are not inwardly motivated. The movement of a machine such as a car is not, according to her, experienced empathetically. She also argues that the movement of a human being sitting in a car is not empathised with as long as we see only the car move the person rather than the person himself move spontaneously, raise himself up in the car, for instance. (Stein 1989, 66–67; 1917, 74–75; see also Aristoteles, DA 1.405b31–406a17.)

On the other hand, she thinks that total immobility is incompatible with a living, sensing body. Living bodies are never totally immobile: they breathe, and their muscles become tense and relax again. The movements of machines, on the other hand, are regular and predictable, and when machines stop moving, their rest is total. (Stein 1989, 68; 1917, 76.)

As we can see, in Stein's view empathy is elicited primarily by other human bodies, secondarily by non-human animal bodies, and, as a limit case, by plants. Machines and other inanimate objects do not elicit empathy.

This scenario is not unproblematic. For one thing, there is a tension between Stein's definition of foreign experience as the object of empathy and her discussion of the sluggishness and vigour of plants as objects of empathy. It is difficult to see how the vigour of a plant can be empathised with, if the object of empathy is always in content non-primordial: empathising with the plant would presuppose that it has experiences, and that is an idea that she herself finds questionable.

Secondly, Stein's contention that only spontaneous, living movement invites empathy does not necessarily have an experiential basis. Many young children become excited by the movements of cars, excavators, trains and aeroplanes, repeating these movements in their games. This might indicate empathising with the movements of the machines. What is more, empirical studies suggest that people can react quite strongly to the movement of a robot hand, [p. 36] when it reaches for a coffee cup. It

would then appear that a movement is “understandable” when it has a goal, even if it is performed by a machine. (Gazzola et al. 2007, 1676; Ruonakoski 2011, 133.)

It would also seem that violent movements that are directed towards inanimate objects, can also arouse empathy-like experiences in the perceiver. If, for instance, a rock is blown up or a building is demolished, one can experience this situation as bodily unpleasant, even if one does not assume that the object is suffering. (See Ruonakoski 2011, 120.)

Having studied the aesthetic theory of empathy, Stein is not completely oblivious to the occasions in which inanimate bodies appear to invite empathy. For instance she admits that one can “inwardly participate in” the movement of a ball that knocks another ball or is hit by another ball. She prefers to call this experience “quasi-empathy” however. In her view, one has to have already interpreted a body as a living body to be able to empathise with it. (Stein 1989, 67; 1917, 76.) Yet this seems like an ad hoc explanation: first spontaneous movement is given as a criterion for eliciting empathy, but when similar “inward participation” occurs with an inanimate object, the experience is given another name, “quasi-empathy”. It can also be argued that empathy does not arise *after* an interpretation of something as living; instead the characteristic “alive” is given in and through the act of empathy itself.

6. Conclusion

Despite the tensions discussed above in Stein’s analysis of empathy, it is clear that *On the Problem of Empathy* still has its value. Published a hundred years ago, and much earlier than Husserl’s *Ideas II*, it is a lucid pioneering work in the phenomenology of intersubjectivity. If anything, Stein creates distinctions and brings out questions and problems that facilitate the work of later phenomenologists on the question of empathy. Phenomenologists that become interested in this question in our days are quite likely to acquaint themselves with Stein’s dissertation.

According to Husserl, empathy answers to the question of how other consciousnesses can be present to us. Among contemporary phenomenologists, Zahavi defines empathy as an experience of the other’s embodied mind, which is quite close to what Stein suggested. This is not the only possible phenomenological interpretation of empathy however. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for instance, presents a view closer to Lipps, namely that *Einfühlung* is possible also with [p. 37] inanimate objects (Merleau-Ponty 1997, 234.) Yet when looking for alternative avenues for a further analysis of the embodied relationship to foreign experience and to the world in general, Stein is still an excellent interlocutor. I suggest her important early work should be read without prejudice and without identifying her thoughts too much with Husserl’s, even if it is certainly true that their works can be read productively together.

Sources

- Balcombe, Jonathan. 2006. *Pleasurable Kingdom: Animals and the Nature of Feeling Good*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Baluška, František, Mancuso, Stefano and Volkmann, Dieter (eds). 2006. *Communication in Plants: Neuronal Aspects of Plant Life*. Berlin: Springer.
- Calcagno, Antonio. 2007. *The Philosophy of Edith Stein*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Gazzola, Valeria, Rizzolatti, Giacomo, Wicker, Bruno and Keysers, Christian. 2007. “The Anthropomorphic Brain: The Mirror Neuron System Responds to Human and Robotic Actions”, *NeuroImage* 35 (2007), 1674–1684.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1931. *Méditations cartésiennes: introduction à la phénoménologie*. Paris: VRIN. Translation by Gabrielle Pfeiffer and Emmanuel Levinas.
- 1950. *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge*, Husserliana Band I. Edited by S. Strasser. Haag: Martinus Nijhoff.
- 1952. *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Zweites Buch: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*. Husserliana Band IV. Edited by Marly Biemel. Haag: Martinus Nijhoff.
- 1976. *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie*. Husserliana, Band III. Edited by Karl Schuhmann. Haag: Martinus Nijhoff. Originally published in 1913.
- 1993. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- 1994. *Briefwechsel, Band VII, Wissenschaftlerkorrespondenz*. Dordrecht: Kluwer. Edited by Karl Schuhmann and Elisabeth Schuhmann.
- Korhonen, Tua and Ruonakoski, Erika. 2017. *Human and Animal in Ancient Greece: Empathy and Encounter in Classical Literature*. London: I.B.Tauris.
- Lipps, Theodor. 1903. *Ästhetik – Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst, Erster Teil: Grundlegung der Ästhetik*. Hamburg: Verlag von Leopold Voss. [p. 38]
- Mallgrave, Harry F. and Ikonomou, Eleftherios. 1994. ‘Introduction’, in Robert Vischer, Conrad Fiedler, Heinrich Wölfflin, Adolf Göller, Adolf von Hildebrand and August Schmarsow, *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873–1893*, translated by Harry F. Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou, The Getty Center Publication Programs, *Texts and Documents* (Santa Monica, California: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994), 1–85.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1990. *Structure du comportement*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France. Originally published in 1942.
- 1997. *Le visible et l’invisible*. Paris: Gallimard. Originally published in 1964.
- Moran, Dermot. 2006. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. London: Routledge.
- Quaranta, A., Siniscalchi, M. and Vallortigara, G. 2007. “Asymmetric Tail-Wagging Responses by Dogs to Different Emotive Stimuli”, *Current Biology* Vol. 17, Issue 6, March 2007.
- Ruonakoski, Erika. 2011. *Eläimen tuttuus ja vieraus: Fenomenologisen empatiateorian uudelleentulkinta ja sen sovellus vieraslajisia eläimiä koskevaan kokemukseen*. Helsinki: Tutkijaliitto.
- Scheler, Max. 1926. *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie: “Phänomenologie der Sympathiegefühle”*. Originally published in 1913 under the name *Zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Sympathiegefühle und von Liebe und Haß*.
- Stein, Edith. 1917. *Zur Problem der Einfühlung*. Halle: Buchdruckerei des Waisenhauses.
- 1989. *On the Problem of Empathy*, The Collected Works of Edith Stein, Vol. 3. Washington, DC: ICS Publications. Translated by Waltraut Stein. Originally published in 1964.

- 2016. *Life in a Jewish Family – Edith Stein: An Autobiography 1891–1916*, The Collected Works of Edith Stein, Vol. 1. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications. Translated by Josephine Koeppl, OCD. Originally published in 1986.
- Tuorila-Kahanpää, Heidi. 2003. *Euroopan ikoni: Edith Steinin elämä 1891–1942*. Jyväskylä: Minerva.
- Zahavi, Dan. 2000. “Self and Consciousness”, *Exploring the Self: Philosophical and Psychopathological Perspectives on Self-experience, Advances in Consciousness Research*, Vol. 23, 55–64, edited by Dan Zahavi. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- 2014. *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy and Shame*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.