

**EMPATHY AND THE PROBLEM OF OTHER MINDS: A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION INTO
SCHELER'S *THE NATURE OF SYMPATHY***

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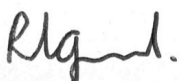
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ABSTRACT

This paper is a phenomenological investigation into empathy and the problem of other minds. I aim to show how knowledge of other minds is possible through an analysis of Scheler's *The Nature of Sympathy*. The first section sets out the problem(s) of other minds, explaining why an investigation into the nature of inter-personal understanding is important. I argue that a response to the problem must take seriously an embodied and embedded conception of mind. Section two concerns the transcendental problem of other minds. I agree with Scheler that the problem of other minds is rooted in a false metaphysical conception of the boundaries between self, other and world. I argue that other-knowledge is possible because inter-personal boundaries are dynamic and permeable. In section three, I analyse the concept of empathy by exploring the claim that maintaining a sense of self is a necessary condition for other-knowledge. I introduce a new distinction between positive and negative empathy in order to clarify Scheler's concept of fellow-feeling as distinct from other forms of inter-emotional experience. I propose that other-knowledge is an achievement of the capacity for positive empathy.

I hereby certify that, except where references show otherwise, all the material contained in the attached dissertation is entirely my own work.



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INTRODUCTION

In what follows I will conduct a phenomenological investigation into empathy and the problem of other minds. The problem of other minds concerns the question: how can we know the thoughts, feelings and emotions of others? My investigation is grounded in a critical analysis of Scheler's *The Nature of Sympathy*. Section one sets out the problem(s) of other minds, explaining why an investigation into the nature of inter-personal understanding is important. I argue that a phenomenological reduction of intersubjectivity allows us to elucidate the important metaphysical connections between self, other, and world which lie at the core of the problem. I reject the theory of analogical inference, arguing that a more satisfactory response requires us to take an embodied and embedded approach to mind. Section two concerns the transcendental problem of other minds, asking how other-knowledge is possible. I explore Scheler's claim that since alterity is contained within the self as a fundamental part of it, egocentrism (which posits the self in an antithetical relation to the other) is false. I claim that it is the dynamic nature of inter-personal boundaries which makes other-knowledge possible. However, I argue that these boundaries are not completely fluid nor transparent, since a failure to uphold the self-other distinction would preclude other-knowledge (i.e. knowledge of other minds). I suggest that inter-personal boundaries can be switched on (opened) or off (closed) according to the will of the agent. I concede that these boundaries can also be opened or removed involuntarily. Section three confronts the concept of empathy as a response to the problem of other minds. I explain the difficulties of defining empathy, and begin with a minimal definition of empathy as a basic sensitivity to the mindedness of others (Zahavi and RoCHAT, 2015, p. 547). I explore Scheler's rejection of Lipps' theory of empathy as a kind of inter-personal mirroring or imitation. I develop the claim that maintaining a sense of self is a necessary condition for other-knowledge by distinguishing fellow-feeling from other forms of inter-emotional experience. In order to clarify Scheler's position, I introduce a new distinction between positive and negative empathy. I argue that although preliminary evidence on mirror-neurons (Gallese and Goldman, 1998) might allow us to explain negative empathy, these findings do not lead to the conclusion that other-knowledge is achieved by an act of inter-personal mirroring. I posit that other-knowledge is an achievement of the capacity for positive empathy, noting that further research is required in order to understand the neurological mechanisms which underlie inter-personal understanding.

i. **SECTION ONE: THE PROBLEM OF OTHER MINDS**

Attaining knowledge of the thoughts, feelings and emotions of others is traditionally considered to be a problem. This is due to the natural assumption that we cannot directly access other minds (Parrott, 2019, p. 5). Where our own minds are concerned, epistemic access is simple. I can immediately know that I am feeling tired, or that I am brooding over an event that happened yesterday. However, I cannot immediately know that my friend is feeling self-critical, or thinking about buying a new car. Other minds appear to be kept behind lock and key, impenetrable to anyone on the outside. Of course, psychoanalysts have shown that our own mental life is not completely transparent to us. Psychological mechanisms such as denial and repression mean that some aspects of our psyche are pushed beyond our conscious reach (Jung, 1991). However, it is generally assumed that knowledge of our own conscious mental states is direct and readily available in a way that others' mental states are not. The problem of epistemic access to other minds is further exacerbated by the somewhat enigmatic status of mental states. Whereas physical objects are tangible, mental states evade empirical observation. I can directly see the teapot on my right, I can pick it up in my hands, feel the weight of it, and turn it around to reveal its hidden sides. Yet I cannot grasp a stranger's guilt in my hands, nor can I turn his worry on its side to reveal its hidden depths. Does this mean that mental states have no existence? It is certainly the case that thoughts and emotions have a very real existence, not only for the one experiencing them, but for those who witness the changing moods and dispositions of others. Although it has been formulated in a number of different ways (Parrott, 2019, p. 2; Scheler, 2017, p. 216), the problem of knowing what other people are thinking and feeling is generally referred to as the problem of other minds. If we cannot directly access other minds, "how then," we might ask, "is it possible to observe the mental life of another person?" (Scheler, 2017, p. 248). Problematically, there appears to be a sharp metaphysical divide between one's own mind and the minds of others. In its most radical formulation, the problem of other minds leads us to the sceptical conclusion that other minds may not even exist (Parrott, 2019, p.3). If we cannot access other minds directly, then how can we know for certain that any mental life exists at all? Any inferential leap from the words or actions of others to their mental states can only ever provide us with possible and never certain knowledge about their mental life. The problem of bridging the metaphysical gap between self and other must be overcome if we are to know, (a) that other minds exist, and (b) how inter-personal understanding is possible.

Knowing that other people actually have thoughts and feelings may seem like a trivial philosophical problem. Most people go about their everyday lives without worrying whether or not their friends and family have minds like their own. It seems like an affront to common sense to say that other people could be "philosophical zombies," (Chalmers, 1998) i.e. that they are nothing more than hollow shells of flesh only assuming the appearance of conscious human beings. For the

purposes of this essay, I intend to focus on the more fruitful formulation of the problem, that is, not whether or not other minds exist (let's call this the ontological problem of other minds) but assuming they do, how knowledge of other minds is *possible* (the transcendental problem of other minds). Once other-knowledge is taken to be possible, I will explore the idea that knowing other minds is an achievement of empathy. A more substantial analysis of empathy will be provided in the third section of this paper. For now, let us use the minimal definition of empathy provided by Zahavi and RoCHAT (2015, p. 547) as a basic sensitivity to the mindedness of others. In order for the following investigation to be taken seriously, we must demonstrate the importance of knowing other minds and show that "mind-reading" (Zahavi, 2011a, p. 541), in the philosophical sense of knowing other minds, is not simple nonsense. Common sense tells us that the ability to know other minds is nothing more than a cheap parlour trick, unworthy of philosophical attention. Yet what is dealt with in philosophical discussions of mind-reading must be removed from any mystical or supernatural connotations. Knowing, at least to some extent, the mental life of other people is a natural and important part of human interaction. The most helpful way to recognise the importance of inter-personal understanding is to return to our inter-personal experience such as it appears to unthematized consciousness. Philosophers including Nietzsche and Husserl have rightly argued that truth demands a dynamic eye which is capable of separating itself from its own preconceptions. Although we can never attain a pure perspective, or as Nietzsche (2013, p. 106.) calls it, "an eye... turned in no direction at all," we can aspire to set aside our convictions in order to describe reality in a way that captures our lived experience prior to its conceptualisation (Husserl, 2002). Once we set aside our preconceptions, we ought to ask ourselves: is it the case that we recognise the mental life of others? It is evident that we are sensitive, albeit in varying degrees, to the minds of others. In fact, we ordinarily take knowledge of other minds for granted. We depend upon a basic knowledge of other people's thoughts, feelings, and desires in order to know how to behave (Parrott, 2019, p. 1). I would argue that, far from being a trivial philosophical problem, knowing (at least to some extent) the minds of others, is crucial to our survival and flourishing as social beings. Failure to recognise the intentions, thoughts, and feelings of others can have disastrous implications for inter-human relations, both individually and collectively. Recognising a friend's mental distress might be the difference between helping him or sending him into irremediable despair. On a wider scale, the collective failure to understand the intentions of a rising fascist leader, for example, might result in the implementation of a brutal dictatorship. I would argue that the extent to which we recognise, understand, or know the minds of others is dependent upon various factors, such as the strength and depth of the relationship (Scheler, 2017, p. 67), the amount of background information we possess, and the degree of sensitivity we have regarding the thoughts and feelings of others. Yet despite these varying factors, we typically know when a stranger is angry or when a friend is upset. Not only do we understand, at least to some extent, the thoughts and feelings of other humans, but we can also recognise mental life in animals. For example, a dog's desire to be taken for a walk or his hostility towards a stranger is understood by his owner. Far from

being a supernatural affair, philosophical mind-reading, or what might be described as empathy in a minimal sense, is an everyday human phenomenon. Neuroscientist Gallese (2001), for example, uses the term “mind-reading” in his studies on mirror neurons. I will return to Gallese’s research in section three, where I explore the claim that resonating mechanisms may “underlie” these “mind-reading” processes (Gallese and Goldman, 1998, 497). I think that scientific research in the field of empathy and inter-personal understanding can go a long way in reconceptualising and demystifying the human capacity to know other minds. The aim of this paper is to reset the theoretical framework within which inter-personal understanding and inter-emotional experience is conceptualised. Gallese (2001) rightly insists on the the social importance of our mind-reading abilities and *ipso facto* the importance of providing an answer to the problem of other minds. “Living in a complex society,” he writes, “requires individuals to develop cognitive skills enabling them to cope with other individuals’ actions, by recognizing them, understanding them, and reacting appropriately to them” (Gallese, 2001, p. 33). Knowing other minds is an everyday human phenomenon; however, the transcendental and epistemological conditions of other-knowledge are unclear.

We have established that knowing other minds is crucial to our survival and flourishing as social animals. Yet what exactly do we mean by other-knowledge or knowing other minds? We must first decide if other-knowledge is a case of mind-reading, in the sense of directly reading another’s thoughts and feelings, or a case of behaviour-reading in which I infer another’s mind from his expressive behaviour. Mental states are commonly understood to be intangible, whereas physical dispositions are publicly accessible. The fact that we live in a tangible physical reality means that the body plays a crucial role in our apprehending the mental states of other people. In fact, as William James pointed out, there is no emotion without an embodied subject: “a purely disembodied human emotion is a nonentity” (1884, p. 194). We know that a friend is upset because she is crying, or that she is nervous because she is trembling. According to the theory of analogical inference, we logically infer the mental states of others from their physical behaviour based upon the fact that (1) the other person is a human being just like us, and (2) these are the same behavioural characteristics we would perform if we possessed the same mental state. In *The Nature of Sympathy* (2017, pp. 238-241), Scheler criticises the theory of analogical inference on five accounts. For the purposes of this essay I will not explore each one. Instead, I will turn to Scheler’s most persuasive and well-thought out argument, which does not entail an attack on individual premises, but rather involves an outright rejection of the groundwork upon which the theory is set. Scheler’s rejection of egocentrism will be explored in further depth in section two. For now, I will take a Schelerian approach to the debate between mind- and behaviour-reading by arguing that the polarisation of mind and body is an unfortunate consequence of the framework within which the question is set. In order to understand what the attainment of other-knowledge involves, we need to dig deeper into the metaphysical framework of subjectivity. I think that it is necessary to point a critical gaze at the historical

conceptualisation of mind and body which informs our current discourse. Taking a birds-eye view reveals that the polarisation of mind-reading and behaviour-reading is the remnant of a Cartesian ghost. Famously, Descartes (2003) distinguished between the mind and the body as two distinct types of thing. For Descartes, the body is a physical thing extended in space. Physical states are tangible and publicly accessible. Conversely, the mind is a non-physical and non-extended entity. If we accept Cartesian dualism, we are forced to polarise two entities which in reality are deeply entwined with one another. Zahavi (2011, p. 546) helpfully summarises the recent philosophical landscape: “the claim has been that we need to take the embodied and environmentally embedded nature of psychological life seriously and acknowledge a more immediate experiential access to the minds of others.” I think that a reconceptualization of the mind/body distinction, which takes seriously the embodied and embedded nature of mind, is key to resolving the debate between mind- and behaviour-reading (Zahavi, 2011a, p. 551). Once we take an embodied and embedded approach, we can understand the human subject as a mind-body unity deeply enmeshed in its concrete socio-historical conditions. Whilst we shape our external reality by building, destroying, and re-moulding our social and physical conditions, we are also importantly shaped by them. As Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 103) writes, we are always “in and towards the world,” existing in a co-constitutive relation with our environment. The extent to which the self is shaped by otherness is an idea explored by Scheler (2017) which we will return to in section two. Phenomenological studies on the mind-body relation demonstrate that, rather than being two separate and irreconcilable entities, whose interaction evades any kind of sensible explanation, mind and body are better understood as a kind of unity. We cannot choose between mind- or behaviour-reading because on an embodied conception of mind knowing the mental life of others is always a question of both. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty speaks of a “body-schema,” (Krueger and Colombetti, 2018, p. 229), a term first used by Husserl in *Ideas II* (1913), in order to capture the role of the body in perception. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of a blind man with a cane (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 54) to demonstrate that external objects can become incorporated as extensions of the body, thus becoming constitutive of a person’s physical bodily perception. The embodied nature of emotion (James, 1884) and perception (Merleau-Ponty, 2012) suggests that the lines between mind, body, and world, are not as fixed and impermeable as the Cartesian model suggests. It is important to recognise that, whilst the terms “mind” and “body” are used to designate two different types of thing, a phenomenological revision of the perceiving subject forces us to reject any sharp mind-body division. The subject is an intelligent operating system controlled largely by the central nervous system. If we equate the mind with the brain, we are then forced to also consider its essential connection to the spinal cord and subsequently the rest of the connected body. In doing so, we have already said that the mind is more than just the brain, since the brain is not a disconnected entity floating in the human skull. The mind, in some sense, *is* the body. It is not housed in the cranial cavity alone, inhabiting the skull like a “Ghost in the Machine” (Ryle, 2009, p. 5). The perceiving subject is an intelligent mind-body unity, an operating system whose

outputs can be conceptualised in terms of the physical and the non-physical, but whose workings are an expression of what is fundamentally a singular unity. Husserl's (Moran and Moonet, 2002) concept of the "lived body" is useful here to capture the mindedness of the body (Zahavi, 2019, p. 82). Husserl rejects the idea that the mind is the rational, intelligent seat of the soul whilst the body is nothing more than a lifeless corpse. Mind-body dualism, which is famously attributed to Descartes, has its roots in the Platonic separation between mind and body. In Plato's *Phaedo* (2019, p. 11), for example, Socrates claims that the mind is "enslaved" to the body, an idea later preserved and perpetuated by the Christian faith. Husserl (2002) rejects the Platonic degradation of the body, introducing a distinction between "Leib" and "Körper" in order to conceptualise the body in its two different aspects: (1) as it is subjectively lived through, and (2) as an object among others (Zahavi, 2019, p. 82). The second aspect represents the body as it is studied in science or medicine, that is, as an empirical object like any other in the world. The first aspect is often described as the body-as-subject. Rather than having or possessing a body in the way that I own a house or a pair of shoes, I *am* my body. My body is my "pivot on the world" which makes perception possible (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 84). Mind and body arise as a unity, actualised as a living, perceiving subject. Phenomenologists have argued rather successfully that the body is our lived medium and vehicle for perception and expression. Taking an embodied and embedded conception of mind allows us to overcome the Cartesian or Platonic dichotomy between mind and body, thus opening up the possibility for capturing what is in fact a more nuanced and liminal reality. Merleau-Ponty (2012) famously captures the dual nature of the body with the example of double-sensation (Zahavi, 2019, p. 83). When one hand touches another, he argues, it is not the same as a hand touching a table or a field of grass. Instead, the hand is perceived both as subject (the one touching) and object (the one touched). Mind and body cannot be successfully demarcated as either subject or object, because as the example of double-sensation shows, they are both. Lovejoy (2001, p. 56) is right to comment that, "Nature refuses to conform to our craving for clear lines of demarcation; she loves twilight zones." If we take an embodied approach, knowing other minds does not need to involve choosing between mind-reading and behaviour-reading. Other-knowledge is an achievement of the mind *and* the body, that is, it is an accomplishment of the perceiving human subject as an intelligent mind-body unity.

ii. SECTION TWO: THE TRANSCENDENTAL PROBLEM OF OTHER-KNOWLEDGE

We have established that a response to the problem of other minds must take seriously the embodied and embedded nature of mind. However, if we are to accurately grasp, as Scheler (2017, p. 213) puts it, “*the nature, existence and knowledge of the ties of connection between the spirits and souls of men,*” that is, if we are to conceptualise the metaphysical connections between self, other and world which provide the transcendental conditions for other-knowledge (i.e. make knowledge of other minds possible), then we must delineate the boundaries between them. Is it the case, as Sartre and Levinas argue (Zahavi, 2019, p. 97), that self and other exist as radically opposed to one another? The traditional egocentric model maintains that we are separate and fundamentally disconnected individuals, confronting an alien world. Egocentrism posits hard and impermeable boundaries between “I” and “them,” opening a gaping chasm between self and other which problematises other-knowledge. Our lived experience, however, shows not only that inter-personal understanding is an everyday human phenomenon, but that it is crucial to our survival and functioning as social creatures. Is Scheler therefore right to argue against the traditional egocentric model? Is it the case, as William James argued over a century ago, that there is no opposition between self and other, that we are born into an undifferentiated stream where the boundaries between individuals and the world around us are fluid and impermeable (Zahavi, 2015, p. 546)? Once again, an investigation into the transcendental conditions of other-knowledge requires us to plunge deeper into the metaphysical foundations which underpin the problem of other minds. In what follows, I will explore Scheler’s metaphysical stance as a radical solution to the problem of other minds and argue that, although Scheler’s argument is insightful insofar as it shifts our egocentric paradigm towards capturing the more liminal nature of our existence, I reject a complete obliteration of the boundaries between self and other on the grounds that it would preclude knowledge of other minds.

Knowledge of other minds is an achievement of the human subject as a mind-body unity. Yet if the subject, i.e. the self, stands in opposition to the other and the world around it, as egocentrism claims, then how is other-knowledge possible? We have outlined the importance of the embodied and embedded approach in answering this question. Let us now explore Scheler’s rejection of egocentrism in favour of an approach which considers others and the world as deeply formational to our sense of self. Scheler argues that it is the egocentric assumption that self-knowledge is primary and more fundamental than other-knowledge which problematises knowledge of other minds. It is this core assumption which characterises traditional responses to the problem of other minds (McAleer, 2017, p. xxxix). Theories of analogical inference and projective empathy assume that we have access to and therefore know the contents of our own mental life in a way which is direct and transparent, whereas other minds are opaque and impossible to know directly. On the egocentric model, the

mental life of other people is largely inaccessible to us, save for what we can infer from other people's physical expressions and behaviour. This assumption, according to Scheler, is "the root error which has to be eradicated" (McAleer, 2017, p. xxxix). Other-knowledge is only problematic when self, other and world are conceptualised within an egocentric world-view which posits them as separate and disconnected entities. *The Nature of Sympathy*, which McAleer (2017, p. xli) rightly describes as "an application of the phenomenological method at its best," is dedicated to the task of undermining our egocentric assumptions. Although Scheler's works have achieved less attention than the works of Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre, I think that *The Nature of Sympathy* is an insightful text which sets the foundations for an embedded conception of mind. Scheler asks us to let go of our cultural egoism and accept a more deeply inter-connected social reality which can "effect a real enlargement of our own lives," and "transcend the limitations of our own actual experiences" (Scheler, 2017, p. 49). Scheler takes the radical position of rejecting egocentrism by providing us with phenomenological evidence which suggests that we are not separate and disconnected selves, but rather exist as part of an undifferentiated stream in which self, other and world are entangled. Scheler's phenomenological approach entices us to remove ourselves, in a truly Husserlian fashion, from the conceptual framework of egocentrism which claims that self-knowledge, that is, knowledge of one's own mental life, is primary and more fundamental than knowledge of other minds, thus positing the self in an antithetical relation to the other. We ought not to take it for granted that there exists an irreconcilable metaphysical divide between "I" and "them." Phenomenologists have rather successfully shown that binary concepts, such as mind and body, or self and other, which we impose upon the world are not always an accurate representation of our lived reality. By conducting a phenomenological reduction and returning to "the things themselves" (Husserl, quoted in Moran and Moonet, 2002, p. 168), we can attempt to set aside our everyday natural attitude which, often unconsciously, shapes our experience into the mould of our presuppositions, conceptualisations and beliefs. Bracketing or setting aside our preconceived notions about other minds allows us to return, at least to some extent, to the pure experience of the other such as it appears to pre-thetic consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. lxxix). Nietzsche provides an illuminating analogy – embarking out upon the ocean allows us to see the coast, perhaps for the first time, in its total configuration. From here we can understand the land better than those who never left it (Nietzsche 2004, p. 256; Scheiffele 1991, p. 42). Scheler, like Nietzsche before him, is a master in undermining our preconceptions by enacting a change of perspective. What bracketing the natural attitude reveals is that the self is deeply shaped by otherness. Scheler argues that from the very first moments we are born into the world we are shaped by alterity. "In the early stages of infancy," Scheler writes, "we absorbed unconsciously, by means of true identification and a genuine 'tradition', certain contents and functions of other minds" (2017, p. 219). The thoughts, feelings, habits and beliefs of those who constitute our environment not only shape our social identity, by influencing our attitudes and preferences, but they also deeply shape our perceptual consciousness by altering how we experience

reality. Our core beliefs about the world which are fundamental to shaping our conscious life arise from out of our external conditions, suggesting that alterity or otherness is contained within the self as an essential part of its structure. Scheler emphasises both the permeability of the self and the pervasiveness of our external dynamics in its formation, claiming that “the essential character of human consciousness is such that the community is in some sense implicit in every individual” (2017, pp. 229-30). I agree with Scheler that it cannot be the case that the self is radically opposed to others, because it is others who largely constitute us as individuals by seeping into the fabric of our ego and moulding our conscious life. “Man is not only part of society,” Scheler (2017, pp. 229-30) writes, but “society and the social bond are an essential part of himself.” Human beings are highly absorbent to the world and the people around them and cannot be understood as independent and disconnected subjects confronting an alien world. We are, as Aristotle (2002) reminds us, social beings who cannot flourish and lead a good and happy life without being part of a deeply interconnected social fabric. Interestingly, Scheler’s claim that alterity is contained within consciousness is reminiscent of Jungian psychoanalysis, echoing Jung’s theory of a “collective unconscious” (1991) which resembles a primordial intersubjectivity existing within the self or psyche. Scheler argues that, originally, there exists no differentiation between oneself and the experiences of others. As a child, one feels the feelings and thinks the thoughts of those who form his social environment (McAleer 2017, p. xxxix). It is only later in our development, Scheler argues (2017, p. 247), that very slowly we begin to raise our “mental head” above the stream of other-experience, gaining detachment from it and thereby becoming conscious of our individuality. Teenagers, for example, assert their independence against their family in order to affirm their own identity. This is often achieved by rebelling against authority, listening to alternative forms of music, or partaking in a non-conventional hobby. It is a long time, Scheler argues, until what was originally a conglomeration of self and other begins to separate itself out and become clearly defined as an individual person (2017, p. 246). Since the child is immersed in the feelings, tendencies and ideas which constitute his immediate environment, Scheler argues that “his own life is at first almost completely hidden from him.” (2017, p. 247). The phenomenological facts of child development demonstrate that our primary experience is not of our own minds, but of the minds of those around us. “Long before the child has ever reached the stage of being capable of a more precise distinction between himself and his mental environment,” Scheler writes, “his consciousness is already filled with ideas and experiences of whose real origin he is completely unaware” (2017, p. 247).

I agree with Scheler that we are not, as many Western philosophers have supposed, isolated egos existing in stark opposition to others and the world that we live in. At every level of our existence, from the emotions we feel to the language we use to verbalise them, we are enmeshed in our external reality. Nearly everything we think and feel has come to us from the outside and has shaped our consciousness in important ways. The recognition that our consciousness is not entirely the product

of our own making is illuminating, but it is also rather cataclysmic insofar as it turns the tables on the foundations on our sense of self. It is an uncomfortable idea that we are largely the product of external forces. Rejecting egocentrism would entail a Copernican overturning of the basic structures of our identity, where individual consciousness, or what can be called the 'basic self,' is no longer at the centre of our universe as the "zero point" (Husserl, 1913, p. 61) for all experience. Intersubjectivity can no longer be a confrontation with a "*radical otherness*," as Sartre and Levinas argue (Zahavi, 2019, p. 97), since alterity is already contained within the self. The presence of an intersubjectivity within a subjectivity demonstrates that the boundaries between self, other and world are far more fluid than the egocentric model suggests. Scheler is in agreement with Heidegger that the idea that we must somehow bridge a metaphysical gap between self and other, which is central to the problem of other minds, is fundamentally mistaken (Zahavi, 2019, p. 95). For Heidegger, "the very suggestion that a bridge or connection has to be established between two initially independent selves, an I and a Thou, is, consequently, a fundamental misunderstanding" (Zahavi, 2019, p. 95). If there is no bridge between minds, then there is no problem of other-knowledge. The rejection of egocentrism leads Scheler to the rather radical conclusion that knowledge of other minds is directly accessible. "Everyone," Scheler writes, "can apprehend the experience of his fellow-men just as directly (or indirectly) as he can his own" (2017, p. 256). Other-knowledge, for Scheler, is an achievement of our natural and "innate capacity for comprehending the feelings of others" (2017, p. 48). It is not the case that we conduct a logical inferential leap from expressive behaviour to states of mind in an attempt to cross a metaphysical gap between two distinct and opposing selves. Rather, since there is no gap to be bridged, knowing the thoughts and feelings of others is a natural achievement of the human capacity for direct experiential understanding. "The other person's state of mind," writes Scheler (2017, p. 46), "is directly grasped in the expressive phenomenon itself" and not an achievement of analogical inference or projective empathy. Scheler's "intuitive theory of fellow-feeling" (2017, p. 61), which further explicates his position on other-knowledge, will be explored in section three.

At first glance, one might argue that Scheler's complete rejection of egocentrism goes too far. Zahavi (2015, p. 546) points out that, "it is now well established that we are not born in a blooming, buzzing, confusion, in some state of undifferentiated fusion with the environment." Developmental psychology has shown that infants recognise their own bodies as differentiated entities, and display remarkable attunement to some features of their environment in favour over others (Zahavi, 2015, p. 546). According to Zahavi, infants "prefer and discriminate among animate as opposed to inanimate things; face vs. non-face entities" (2015, p. 547). If we existed in an undifferentiated stream, we would expect humans to make no important distinctions between entities in the world. However, I think it would be an uncharitable interpretation of Scheler to claim that he posits no inter-personal boundaries. This might be a forgivable interpretation, due to the fact that Scheler contradicts himself a number of times in the course of his investigation. As Frings points out, Scheler "was not too

concerned about contradictions in general” (1965, pp. 23-24). However, Scheler is not so ignorant of the phenomenological facts to argue that there is no metaphysical distinction between self and other. In fact, as we shall show in the following section, Scheler argues that the affirmation of inter-personal boundaries is a necessary condition for other-knowledge, despite the fact that an absence of boundaries marks most forms of inter-emotional experience. What is needed is a middle ground between impermeable and opaque inter-personal boundaries, and a completely undifferentiated picture of reality. Of course, infants do differentiate between themselves, others, and objects in the world, but as Scheler points out (2017, pp. 219; 239; 247), children are also deeply shaped by their environment. Our social milieu not only provides us with a grammatical language, but an emotional and ideological language made up of the feelings, beliefs, ideas and attitudes of others. That said, it is important to impose some distinction between ourselves and others. I think that metaphysically we might understand the relationship between self and other, as less of a conflict, but more of a continual meeting, engaging, remoulding and disengaging, which characterises the way in which we adapt to our environment. I would argue that the fluidity or opacity of these boundaries is often a matter of volitional human agency. We choose to be open and receptive to people, ideas, and places, or we choose to be closed, defensive and protective of our selfhood. One engages with the people who contribute to their happiness and development, whilst rejecting others who make them feel unhappy or depleted. When one decides to read a book, or watch a television programme, one does so with the intention to lower one’s boundaries and absorb something from the outside. In this sense, our inter-personal and inter-wordly boundaries might be understood as being either switched on or off according to the will of the agent. There are, of course, many cases in which these boundaries are switched off involuntarily, such as in the case of emotional or psychic contagion. These will be explored in the following section.

However, whilst boundaries may be fluid and open at times it is not the case that they are completely transparent and therefore obliterated. I agree with Levinas and Sartre that any account of intersubjectivity will fail if it tries to eliminate this fundamental difference between self and other (Zahavi, 2019, p. 98). If there were no inter-personal boundaries separating “I” from “them”, then the thoughts and feelings of other people would be immediately accessible in a way that simply does not align with our lived experience. Although we generally understand when someone is distressed or angry, it is not the case that we can literally read another’s thoughts or feel his regret in the same way that he feels it. Whilst Scheler rather confusingly says that everyone can apprehend the experiences of others just as directly as he can his own (2017, p. 256), he also claims that other-knowledge must have “set relative limits to what is private and must therefore remain beyond understanding” (2017, pp. 67-68). The disclosure of one’s mental life is a voluntary choice for Scheler, and not simply laid bare upon the table for anyone to read. Although it is the case, according to Scheler, that we *can* access the thoughts and feelings of others, insofar as direct experiential access is a possibility, we

can only know a person once he chooses to reveal himself to us (McAleer 2017, p. xviii). “Persons’ cannot be intuitively understood,” writes Scheler, “unless they spontaneously disclose themselves. For they are also capable of silence and concealment” (2017, p. 101). What Scheler is referring to is not simply knowledge of another’s mental life but complete knowledge of the person himself. Although personality is something over and above the conscious life of the individual, I think that where inter-personal understanding is concerned there is an important connection between the two. Scheler is right to argue that the extent to which we can know another person is dependent upon the strength and depth of the relationship (2017, p. 67). The extent to which we can know a person informs the extent to which we can know his thoughts and feelings, because understanding who he is, which importantly involves a certain knowledge of his beliefs, desires, and intentions, allows us to make sense of the content of his mental life by placing it within a meaningful context, i.e. within the framework of his personality. Scheler argues that the “intelligible content” of personality varies “according to whatever type of bond it may be which links people together,” (2017, p. 67) whether that be acquaintance, friendship, marriage, society, or nationality. Other-knowledge, Scheler writes (2017, p. 67), “depends entirely on the nature and depth of the love involved.” I think this is because our decision to be a friend, a lover, or a fellow-citizen, is also in some sense a decision to be open and receptive to another, to lower or temporarily switch off our inter-personal boundaries in order to connect and be receptive to the other. Although it is not the case that there never exist boundaries between people, it is possible for boundaries to be open or closed to greater or lesser degrees. For example, Scheler uses the example of “mutual coalescence” in “*truly* loving sexual intercourse” to show that there are instances in which human beings “seem to relapse into a single life-stream in which nothing of their individual selves remains any longer distinct” (2017, p. 25). In what follows, I will explore different forms of other-experience in which inter-personal boundaries are disintegrated, arguing that emotional or cognitive identification must be distinguished from other-knowledge in the full sense. It is the fact that these boundaries are dynamic, and that one can be open and receptive or closed and resistant to phenomena, that other-knowledge and, in the broader sense, knowledge of the external world is possible. Empathy, in the minimal sense of a basic sensitivity to the mindedness of others (Zahavi and Rochat, 2015, p. 547), depends upon the capacity to lower our inter-personal boundaries.

I have argued that the transcendental conditions for other-knowledge are dependent upon a metaphysical conception of the world structured with dynamic boundaries. Inter-personal boundaries, which can be switched on or off according to volitional agency (i.e. by choosing to be receptive or resistant to others), allow for the possibility of other-knowledge. Scheler is right to criticise the traditional egocentric assumption underlying the problem of other minds that we are separate and disconnected selves existing in stark opposition to each other and the world around us. Otherness exists within the self as a fundamental part of its structure. However, it is not the case that this entails

a complete obliteration of any boundaries between “I” and “them”. In what follows, I will argue that the complete absence of inter-personal boundaries precludes the possibility of other-knowledge. It is only when a sense of self is retained that other-knowledge is possible (Scheler, 2017).

iii. **SECTION THREE: EMPATHY AND FELLOW-FEELING**

The third part of this investigation will develop the claim that maintaining a sense of self is a necessary condition for other-knowledge. Scheler (2017) takes this to be the defining feature of “fellow-feeling,” which he distinguishes from forms of other-experience such as emotional contagion and identification. For Scheler, fellow-feeling is “the primary act” (2017, p. 62) by which we know other minds. Before expounding the “intuitive theory of fellow-feeling” (2017, p. 61), Scheler argues that traditional responses to the problem of other minds are unsuccessful. We have already explored Scheler’s criticism that the theory of analogical inference is rooted in a false egocentric world-view. Yet it is fellow-feeling which Scheler believes is most successful in “dissipating the naïve illusion” of egocentrism (2017, p. 58). In order to best understand what Scheler argues other-knowledge consists in, it will be helpful to investigate his preliminary discussion of what other-knowledge is not. I will begin with Scheler’s rejection of the theory of empathy. So far, we have used the minimal definition of empathy provided by Zahavi and Rochat (2015, p. 547) as a basic sensitivity to the mindedness of others. This is similar to the definition provided by “early empathy theorists such as Lipps, Stein and Husserl, who used the term to designate the most basic capacity to recognize others as minded creatures” (Zahavi, 2011a, p. 544). Where interpretations of Scheler are concerned, however, there seems to be some confusion. As Zahavi points out (2010, p. 289), a number of philosophers including Husserl and Stein have referred to Scheler’s theory as a theory of empathy. However, in both *The Nature of Sympathy* (2017, p. 241) and *The Idols of Self-Knowledge* (1973, p. 247), Scheler describes empathy alongside the theory of analogical inference as an “equally nugatory” response to the problem of other minds. This contradiction is due to equivocations of the term “empathy”. Empathy has been defined in various ways over the years (Zahavi, 2011a, p. 544) and “despite all the work being done in various disciplines,” Zahavi points out (2015, p. 543), there is “still no firm agreement about what precisely empathy is.” In what follows I will introduce a distinction between positive and negative empathy in order to help clarify any misunderstandings of Scheler’s position. But first, it is helpful to recognise that what Scheler is rejecting is not empathy in any minimal sense, but the theory of empathy espoused by Theodor Lipps. For Lipps, empathy involves a kind of inter-personal mirroring (Zahavi, 2011b, p. 245). Lipps takes inspiration from Hume’s notion of sympathy in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which allows the minds of human beings to become mirrors to one another (Montag et al., 2008, p. 1261). Lipps adapts the Humean concept to argue that empathy is an instinctive process of “inner imitation” (Montag et al., 2008, p. 1261) between individuals, which is comprised of two components: first, an instinct towards imitation and secondly, an instinct towards expression (Zahavi, 2010, p. 288; 2011bb, p. 222). When I observe John’s gritted teeth and clenched fists, I have a natural tendency to physically imitate or reproduce his behaviour (Zahavi, 2011b, p. 542). By mirroring his physical dispositions, I produce in myself the same mental states commonly attributed to those behaviours (e.g. anger or hostility). Lipps does not agree with the claim sometimes

made by phenomenologists that empathy involves a direct experience of other minds. The claim that mental states are perceivable was a central tenet of classical phenomenology (Parrott 2019, p. 9), and is now often referred to as the direct social perception or DSP model (Krueger, 2018; Zahavi 2011a, p. 542). Lipps stands with simulation theorists against phenomenologists when he argues that we only have experiential access to our own minds (Zahavi, 2011b, p. 223). In order to attain other-knowledge, it therefore becomes necessary to project the self into the other.

Scheler rejects Lipps' idea that the self is "carried over into the other person" (2017, p. 45). If it were the case that we had to "impute our own experience to others," then we could never hope to have knowledge of the other as the other, but only knowledge of one's own experiences repeated "all over again" (Scheler, 2017, p. 242). The idea that "we are supposed, firstly, to be necessarily confined in the prison of our own causal experiences, in all their individual, racial and historical heterogeneity" is a problematic consequence of the egocentric paradigm (Scheler, 2017, p. 49). If Lipps is right, then how could we ever hope to understand the joys and agonies of others that we have not yet experienced ourselves? Scheler (2017, p. 49) uses a Biblical example, arguing that "Jesus' despair in Gethsemane can be understood and shared regardless of our historical, racial and even human limitations." I think that Scheler is right to argue that other-knowledge must extend beyond the scope of our own personal history. How else could we understand fictional characters, for example, who experience a world of emotion that we have not yet felt? Although I would argue that we can understand more of others whose experiences are similar to our own, it is certainly the case that we can feel-with and understand the emotions and feelings of others which extend beyond the scope of our own personal experience.

Whilst a number of early phenomenologists disagreed with Lipps' idea that mirroring or imitation constitutes the basis of empathy, his theory has remained influential (Zahavi, 2011a, p. 542-542). Recent neuroscientific studies by Vittorio Gallese (1998; 2001; 2004), for example, have suggested that human beings are comprised of a "mirror matching system," providing evidence that empathy might be a kind of inner imitation. Studies on mirror neurons have suggested that when we observe another person's behaviour, "our motor system 'resonates' along with that of the observed agent" (Gallese, 2001, p. 38). When we watch someone laugh or run on a treadmill, for example, there is an implicit, automatic, and unconscious "activation of various visual areas," alongside an activation of the motor circuits which are activated when we perform that same action ourselves (Gallese, 2001, p. 37; Gallese, 2001, p. 41). This suggests that, on a neurological level, our minds may in fact be mirrors of one another. Gallese and Goldman (1998, p. 44) have argued that this "neural matching mechanism... is crucial to establish an empathic link between different individuals." I think that research on mirror neurons is an exciting advance in our understanding of inter-emotional experience. However, it does not establish that empathy is the primary means by which we attain

other-knowledge. The problem lies in Gallese's use of the term empathy, which is very similar to Lipps' use of the term as a kind of inner imitation. I will argue that Gallese's mirror-neuron thesis describes forms of inter-emotional experience which classify as "negative empathy" in which individuals experience a loss of self, thus failing to meet the criterion for other-knowledge.

Scheler (2017) argues that inter-personal mirroring or identification is just one form of other-experience which fails to provide us with other-knowledge in the full sense. Criticising Lipps' idea that we project our own experiences onto others, Scheler (2017, p. 47) argues that, in fact, "what we see is the opposite tendency, whereby we "entertain the experiences of other people as if they were our own." Frings (1965, p. 32) helpfully distinguishes Scheler's four types of inter-emotional experience discussed in *The Nature of Sympathy*: (1) Community of feeling (Miteinanderfühlen), (2) Fellow-feeling (Mitfühlen, Mitgefühl), (3) Psychic contagion (Psychische Ansteckung), and (4) Emotional identification (Einsfühlung). Lipps' theory of empathy, and Gallese's mirror-neuron thesis, are examples of (4). The problem with empathy, or as Frings calls it, "emotional identification" is that, it can never prove "that this self" which I am experiencing "is other and different from my own" (2017, p. 242). This is because any kind of identical mirroring between persons would break down the crucial "self-other distinction" (Zahavi and Rochat, 2015, p. 551) which other-knowledge relies upon. The same holds true for community of feeling and psychic contagion which are to be distinguished from fellow-feeling on the grounds that only the latter "involves intentional reference" to the other's mental state "as having become an object of understanding" (Frings, 1965, p. 35). Fellow-feeling, unlike other forms of inter-emotional experience, succeeds in affirming the crucial self-other distinction whilst feeling-into the other. In community of feeling, psychic contagion, and emotional identification, the self is lost in the other. In order to explicate the concept of "community of feeling", Scheler (2017, pp. 12-13) provides the example of two parents grieving for a deceased child. Scheler describes this as a "*feeling-in-common*" (2017, p. 13) in which the sorrow and grief are "identical" for both parents (2017, p. 13). In this example, there is no distinction between the mental life of the mother and the father; instead, "they feel in common the 'same' sorrow, the 'same' anguish" (2017, p. 12), thus disintegrating any boundaries between them. On a neurological level, one might hypothesise that the parents' motor systems are resonating with one another, running an identical programme of grief (Gallese, 2001). In order to distinguish "*feeling-in-common*" or community of feeling from fellow-feeling, Scheler uses the example of a third-party entering the room. Recognising the grief between the parents, the third-party would participate in an "act of understanding or 'vicarious' feeling," which would classify as "fellow-feeling proper... as a *re*-action to the state and value of the other's feelings" (Scheler, 2017, p. 14). The difference with fellow-feeling is that, rather than identifying with the parents and losing her sense of self, the third-party understands *her* commiseration and *their* suffering as "being phenomenologically two different facts" (2017, p. 13). It is by maintaining a boundary between one's

own experiences and the experiences of others that fellow-feeling meets the necessary criterion for other-knowledge.

Let us now turn to psychic or emotional contagion. Although the word “contagion” has negative connotations, Scheler insightfully points out that sometimes we want to be infected by others. We often seek out infection for our “own pleasure” (2017, p. 19) in order to lift our mood. Scheler provides the example of “the cheerful atmosphere in a ‘pub’ or at a party” which may ‘infect’ the newcomers, who may even have been depressed beforehand” (2017, p. 15). It is not only the people, but also the “atmosphere” of the pub or the party which “can work infectiously in this way on the state of our emotions” (2017, p. 15). “The serenity of a spring landscape”, Scheler (2017, p. 15) writes, or “the melancholy of a rainy day”, can infect our emotions in the same way. Scheler is right to point out that not only people, but environments can also change the way we feel, thus emphasising the importantly embedded nature of mind. The infectious nature of other people and our environment provides further phenomenological evidence that the boundaries between self, other, and world are permeable and dynamic. Cases of emotional or psychic infection cannot count as instances of pure other-knowledge, according to Scheler, because the individual fails to maintain a sense of self. “The process of infection is an involuntary one,” Scheler (2017, p. 15) writes. The emotions by which one is infected have a cumulative effect on the one infected, gathering “momentum like an avalanche” (2017, p. 15). Frings (1965, p. 36) helpfully distinguishes two forms of psychic contagion: (1) as occurring between one or two, or a small number of people, and (2) in a mass of people (e.g. a mob). I think that (2) is the most illustrative example of emotional infection. Scheler offers an eloquent description of the formation of a group or herd mentality, which in its most sinister exemplification might be imagined as something like a Nazi rally. Here the minds of all members have been infiltrated by a singular ideology. I will quote Scheler at length:

“it is above all this reciprocal effect of a self-generating infection which leads to the uprush of a common surge of emotion, and to a characteristic feature of a crowd in action, that it is so easily carried beyond the intentions of every one of its members, and does things for which no one acknowledges either the will or the responsibility.” (2017, pp. 15-16).

Scheler is right to argue that emotions are infectious. To use a contemporary example, the Coronavirus pandemic has not only involved the physical transmission of a virus, but also a global contagion of fear, anxiety and misinformation which has “gathered momentum like an avalanche” (Scheler 2017, p.15) through mass-media attention. The collective anticipation of a football match, for example actualised by the crowd’s cheering, singing and wearing of coloured shirts, is felt and shared by a nation in the lead up to the game. The existence of collective ideas, emotions, fears and traditions which mark any human society demonstrates that our minds are not entirely separate and

disconnected entities. The fact that we are capable of both shaping and being shaped by our external reality leads us to conclude that our inter-personal and inter-worldly boundaries are not impenetrable dividing lines but dynamic peripheries capable of both separation and coalescence. It is when we are subject to involuntary coalescence, however, such as in the case of emotional infection, that our experience of the other cannot count as knowledge. Emotional or psychic contagion, unlike fellow-feeling, lacks intentionality towards someone (Frings, 1965, p. 36), but is rather a kind of absorption of otherness which fails to both affirm oneself *qua* oneself and other *qua* other.

What these forms of inter-emotional experience have in common is that they fail to uphold a distinction between self and other. In order to clarify Scheler's position, I propose to distinguish two forms of empathy. First, positive empathy can be characterised as an intentional form of inter-emotional experience where the mental life of another is recognised and felt-into as distinct from one's own. Positive empathy can be understood as synonymous with Scheler's concept of "fellow-feeling." An example of positive empathy would be the third-party who enters the room and commiserates for the parents' grief (2017, p. 14) whilst identifying *their* grief as separate from *her* commiseration. The third-party onlooker can be said to know the mental life of the parents. Secondly, negative empathy can be characterised as any form of inter-emotional identification in which the experienced mental state is the same in both individuals. The mother and father who share in the same grief undergo an act of negative empathy. There is no distinction between the parents, and therefore, the mother and father fail to have knowledge in the full sense of each other's minds (Scheler, 2017, pp. 12-13). In all acts of negative empathy, the distinction between self and other is lost. Negative empathy includes but is not limited to community of feeling, psychic contagion, and emotional identification. As such it is perhaps our most common form of inter-emotional experience. On this definition, both Lipps' theory of empathy and Gallese's mirror neuron thesis are instances of negative empathy. Reconceptualising Scheler's text within this framework can help us resolve any confusion regarding his position. Whilst Scheler's theory might be understood as a theory of *positive* empathy, Scheler clearly rejects negative empathy as a source of other-knowledge (2017, p. 241; 1973, p. 247) despite its commonality in our everyday lives as a type of other-experience.

iv. CONCLUSION

To conclude, I have outlined the transcendental conditions for other-knowledge by arguing that the boundaries between self, other, and world are dynamic and permeable. However, it is not the case that these boundaries are entirely fluid and transparent. Inter-personal boundaries are capable of being switched on or off according to the will of the agent. However, there are also cases in which any distinction between self and other involuntarily collapses (e.g. emotional or psychic infection). I agree with Scheler that it is only when the distinction between self and other is maintained that inter-emotional experience can count as knowledge. I have developed this claim through an analysis of the concept of empathy and Scheler's theory of fellow-feeling as the primary way in which we attain knowledge of other minds. I distinguish fellow-feeling from other forms of inter-emotional experience which fail to count as other-knowledge. In order to clear up any misconceptions regarding Scheler's position, I introduce a distinction between positive and negative empathy. Positive empathy is an intentional act of feeling-into others whilst maintaining a sense of self, and as such can be equated with the concept of fellow-feeling. Negative empathy is as an involuntary identification or feeling-with others. Whilst Scheler's theory might be understood as a theory of *positive empathy*, Scheler explicitly rejects negative empathy as an explanation of how we attain knowledge of other minds. Gallese's (1998; 2001; 2004), studies on mirror-neurons are an exciting development in the field of cognitive science, which may help us to understand the neural mechanisms which underlie our natural "mind-reading abilities" (2001, p. 47). Whilst this evidence can explain a variety of inter-emotional experiences, which I have labelled as forms of negative empathy, I do not think it is an explanation of our ability to attain knowledge of (or positively empathise with) other minds. I propose that knowledge of other minds is an achievement of the capacity for positive empathy. The question, 'what can we attain from negative empathy if not knowledge?' is an interesting development of the positive empathy thesis, which unfortunately is beyond the scope of this essay. Further research is required in order for us to accurately describe how other-knowledge is attained, including the neurological mechanisms which underlie it. The aim of this paper has been to lay the theoretical groundwork for future research, shifting the paradigm towards an embodied and embedded conception of mind which takes seriously the dynamic and permeable nature our intersubjective experience.

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