



Against empathy

Description

“The term ‘empathy,’ has provided a guiding thread for a whole range of fundamentally mistaken theories concerning man’s relationship to other human beings and to other beings in general, theories that we are only gradually beginning to overcome today.” (203).

That’s a quote from Martin Heidegger’s book of 1929-30 based on a lecture series bearing the title *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, though with the more catchy subtitle: *World, Finitude, Solitude*. The text wasn’t published until the 1980s, and translated into English in 1995. So a reader can be forgiven for just catching up with it. The prose is much easier to follow than *Being and Time*, or his later more poetic works, though it’s long at 366 pages.

The book is of interest in the current climate. On the way to understanding what it is to be human, or in a ‘world,’ the book addresses nature, animals and the human condition of boredom. The nature-animal material has been picked up by contemporary philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben in his 2004 book *The Open: Man and Animal*. That’s my entry point to Heidegger’s book.

I’m shelving animals and boredom for the time being, but Heidegger’s objection to empathy rancors a bit, in light of the positive associations of the term. Who could object to the ability to put oneself in the place of another?



Already-with

The answer is simple – we are already with one another. For Heidegger, *empathy* suggests that we are outside in the first place, and then have to – feel our way – into the other being in order to reach it. Here and elsewhere Heidegger looks beyond psychology, and the language of the emotions – hence the *fundamental* of his title. It’s only because we are already *being with others* as part of our fundamental natures that we can transpose ourselves into another person, i.e. I can put myself in someone else’s shoes.

He says – The question concerning whether we human beings can transpose ourselves into other human beings does not ask anything, because it is not a possible question in the first place. It is meaningless, indeed a nonsensical question because it is fundamentally redundant. (205). It presumes that we come together from an initial position of solipsistic isolation. Heidegger is trying to break down the dogma that we are to understand ourselves as subject and consciousness. (208). It’s an argument against Descartes and the dualism that asserts the difference between subject and object – the thinking, aware self and everything else, including other people.

Empathy restored

The supposed problem with empathy could just be a matter of definition. Other texts on empathy, from Adam Smith to contemporary neurobiology, also suggest that we are hardwired to relate to each other, and are attuned to one another, to the point of mimicking each other’s actions and feelings. They call this – empathy. Heidegger’s philosophy arguably adds authority to the idea that *being-with*, empathy, or whatever we call it, is not a condition we need to cultivate, but to recognise and restore if for some reason it fades.

In an article published in 1994, and before Heidegger’s *Fundamental Concepts* was in circulation, philosopher Michael Zimmerman asserted that – once one is released from the constricted self-understanding associated with dualistic egocentrism, other people and things in the world no longer appear as radically separate and threatening, but instead as profoundly interrelated phenomena. (309).

In light of the outpouring of empathetic demonstrations over the murders at [Charlie Hebdo](#) in Paris this week I welcome any philosophy that diminishes suspicion and threat and adds weight to the basic, underlining reality of human solidarity. And I don’t think I’m alone in that view.

Bibliography

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Notes

- Heidegger also mentions empathy in *Being and Time* (pp.162-163).
- Zimmerman's writing is also helpful in positioning Heidegger's apparent partisanship and lack of empathy during the troubling years around WWII.
- The image above is of the Champs-Élysées in Paris on 31 December 2014.
- Also see blog post [Posh boys and mirror neurons](#), and [Mood and movement \(and dance\)](#).
- On "I am Charlie" see post: [I am Spartacus](#).

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2. Heidegger
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