EMPATHY BETWEEN EMBODIMENT AND DIGITAL DEPERSONALIZATION: PHILOSOPHICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS

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Developing an Understanding of Empathy

Empathy is one of the basic human abilities that allows us to understand the inner world of another person without having to connect with them or interfere with their autonomy. It is a unique way of experiencing that goes beyond simple rational explanations or emotional sympathy. Empathy is not just a functional tool for understanding, but a way of being that creates a relationship.[1]

Due to its complexity and multidimensionality, as well as the different theoretical approaches, scientific backgrounds, and personal beliefs of the authors dealing with empathy, it is difficult to find a single and unambiguous definition of this phenomenon. A historical overview shows that various scientific disciplines have attempted to define the term *empathy*, with each approach pursuing its own goals and purposes.[2] The origin of the term can be found in German aesthetics under the term *Einfühlung*, which refers to the apparent projection and fusion

[1] This article was written in the framework of the research project J6-60105 *Theology and digitalization: anthropological and ethical challenges*, funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).

[2] Susan Verducci, "A conceptual history of empathy and a question it raises from moral education," *Educational Theory* 50, no. 1 (2000): 75, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2000.00063.x.

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of the viewer with the object being viewed (e.g., a work of art). The viewer transfers his or her inner feelings to the object and thus arrives at a deeper understanding of it.[3] This concept was initially applied to the understanding of interpersonal relationships, but it soon became apparent that things were not so simple. Psychologists and philosophers who have studied this phenomenon particularly intensively have formulated various definitions and pointed out new aspects of the empathic experience.

The concept of *Einfühlung* has also become very important in philosophy, especially in discussions about the human ability to understand the thoughts and experiences of others. Philosophy has worked hard in recent centuries, and especially since the twentieth century, to clarify the concept of the subject (the particular) and to address the issue of intersubjectivity and, in this context, empathy.[4] The concept has been discussed primarily in the context of phenomenology, which has attempted to describe in detail the nature of the phenomenon of empathy. Edmund Husserl, his student Edith Stein, and others have used and further developed the concept to explain intersubjectivity between thinking individuals. Within this framework of intersubjectivity, empathy not only enables individuals to recognize the thoughts of others and others as thinking beings, but it also helps them to develop a reflective and self-critical view of themselves by recognizing how others think about them.[5]

The key point of Husserl's thinking is to emphasize the importance of intersubjectivity in the construction of our rational world. Husserl attempted to answer the question of how humans come to know the world and themselves. In doing so, he introduced the concept of a minimal basis from which humans start in their concrete experience when they perceive the world and act in it. The search for this basis leads him through a reduction to the pure self. However, the world (co-)created by the individual is not solipsistic. In fact, the world is such that

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3 Lauren Wispé, "History of the concept of empathy," in *Empathy and its Development*, ed. Nancy Eisenberg and Janet Strayer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 18.

4 Valentina Hribar Sorčan, "O empatiji in intersubjektivnosti," *Anthropos* 1–2, no. 209–210 (2008): 13.

5 Karsten R. Stueber, *Rediscovering Empathy* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 9.

it includes other persons outside the individual. In order to avoid the danger of his philosophy falling into a transcendental solipsism that would grant the person alone the power to understand everything outside himself, Husserl emphasizes the importance of our experience of the lifeworld. Here, he is convinced that the meaning of the world cannot have a purely individual origin, which is why he introduces the concept of *intersubjectivity*. Our world is a shared world to which all individuals make a decisive contribution.[6]

Empathy is also subordinate to Husserl's concept of intersubjectivity. Empathy is deeply rooted in the experience of our body, because the body is the primary means by which we can have experiences that are the same or similar to those of others. It also enables us to experience others, whom we recognize not only as bodies filled with spirit, but also as persons like ourselves.[7] Empathy is an experience in which I feel that my actions permeate my own world and that others are part of my own world. The fundamental message of Husserl's theory of empathy and intersubjectivity is that the other is not a fully formed and constructed individual to whom I attribute mental states; rather, the other is an other for me because he or she has an existential value for me, because he or she co-creates the world in which I live. The other person is not a fully formed and constructed individual to whom I attribute mental states, but the other is an Other for me because he or she has an existential value for me, because he or she co-creates the world in which I live.[8]

Edith Stein, a student of Husserl's who dedicated her doctoral thesis *Zum Problem der Einfühlung (On the Problem of Empathy)* (1917) to the subject, gave empathy an even clearer foundation. Stein talks about empathy in a very clear and simple way, and at the center of her thinking is the notion that empathy is not simply taking on the feelings of another, but goes deeper: it enables us to experience the other as another, as a person in their own right. Empathy is a phenomenon in

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6 Hribar Sorčan, "O empatiji in intersubjektivnosti,"18–19.

7 Vittorio Gallese, "The roots of empathy: The shared manifold hypothesis and the neural basis of intersubjectivity," *Psychopathology* 36, no. 4 (2003): 175–176, https://doi.org/10.1159/000072786.

8 Hribar Sorčan, "O empatiji in intersubjektivnosti," 20.

which one person perceives another person.[9] Empathic experiences are those in which we experience a certain content or event as something that does not happen to us, but the experience of another. Like memory or imagination, empathy is also a part of imagination. In this case, the content is present in the imagination, but not the actual imagination. Empathy is about imagining what the other person is experiencing. Just as memory is the representation of past (usually personal) experiences, empathy is the representation of another person's experience. By imagining this experience, you are "drawn" into the experience of the other person and are thus able to see the situation from their point of view. Similar feelings are aroused as in the other person, except that the person who is empathic is not really in the same situation.[10] Here, then, Stein's distinction between the actual experience and the content of the experience is central to her discussion of empathy. Through empathy, we experience the same content in the face of an actual event as another person experiences it. We feel as if the event affects us. Because of this special ability, we have access to the inner experience of the other in a way that does not depend on our ability to guess.[11] Empathy is thus a two-sided experience: it is ours, but at the same time speaks of an experience that was never ours.

Although empathy has long been a topic of interest to writers outside psychology, its psychological nature has always been evident. Theories of empathy in psychology were heavily influenced by the psychological aestheticians Lipps and Titchener until Wolfgang Kohler began to emphasize its cognitive nature. He argued that empathy means understanding the feelings of another, rather than feeling those feelings with them. Almost simultaneously, two very influential theorists, George Herbert Mead and Jean Piaget, addressed the question of empathy in different ways. Both emphasized the cognitive aspect of empathy over its emotional aspect. Mead, who emphasized the distinction between the self and other in empathy, placed the cognitive component in the

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9 Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy* (Washington: ICS Publications, 1989), 1.

10 *Ibid.*, 8–11.

11 Sarah Borden, *Edith Stein* (London: Continuum, 2003), 27–29; Barbara Simonič, "Dialoške razsežnosti empatije pri Edith Stein," *Edinost in dialog* 75, no. 2 (2020): 314–318, https://doi.org/10.34291/Edinost/75/02/Simonic.

foreground and defined empathy as the ability to understand the other. He focused heavily on the individual's ability to take on the role of another person in order to understand how the other person understands and sees the world. Empathy is thought to facilitate social interaction by helping us anticipate the other person's behavior and thus prepare ourselves to respond appropriately. The process of empathy is defined as the mechanism by which we predict the attitudes and behavior of other people. Piaget also emphasized the cognitive function of empathy in his research on children's cognitive development. Empathy is necessary for individuals to step out of themselves and put themselves in the shoes of others. For him, empathy is merely the cognitive ability to recognize and determine the emotional states of others.[12]

Empathy has also been important in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Freud described it merely as a consequence of identification, which gives the child insight into the mother's feelings.[13] Harry Stack Sullivan pointed out that a therapeutic relationship characterized by empathy has a considerable influence on the patient's behavior and that early empathy between mother and child supports the development of social skills. Carl Rogers saw empathy as an important prerequisite for therapeutic change, in which the therapist empathizes with the client's world without judging, while maintaining self-reflection. Heinz Kohut saw empathy as a fundamental tool of psychoanalysis, a fusion of affective attunement and data collection that enables the therapist to gain insight into the patient's inner world and heal empathic childhood errors.[14]

The concept of *empathy* has a relatively short but rich history, accompanied by different understandings of the phenomenon. Different scientific disciplines, such as philosophy, theology, developmental, social, and personality psychology, psychotherapy, neuroscience, and others, have never reached a consensus on the nature of empathy itself.[15] As

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[12] Tanja Lamovec, "Empatija," *Anthropos* 17, no. 5/6 (1987): 234–235; Barbara Simonič, *Empatija* (Ljubljana: Brat Frančišek in Franciškanski družinski inštitut, 2010), 38–39.

[13] Verducci, "A conceptual history of empathy," 70.

[14] *Ibid*., 75; Simonič, *Empatija*, 38–41.

[15] Stephanie D. Preston and Frans B. M. de Waal, "Empathy. Its ulitimate and proximate bases," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 25, no. 1 (2002): 1, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0140525x02000018.

a result, explanations of empathy are often accompanied by a degree of ambiguity and confusion, as many definitions are abstract and vague. Sometimes the differences between definitions are a matter of nuance, but they can still have a significant impact on the understanding of the concept. Furthermore, many authors have only considered certain components or aspects of this complex phenomenon, which they then simplistically label as empathy.[16]

Definition and Meaning of Empathy

Despite the differing emphases of the individual definitions, what they have in common is that empathy enables us to perceive, understand, or express how another person experiences a particular situation—whether in the present, the past, or the future. It follows that empathy is not uniform in nature, but rather a complex phenomenon with multiple dimensions. It can be seen as a primarily cognitive process aimed at understanding and getting to know the other person, or as an affective experience that emphasizes emotional responsiveness and experience. Empathy is also closely related to other related forms of interpersonal bonding and emotional responding, such as sympathy and compassion.[17] As it consists of several components, each with its own characteristics, empathy is not easy to define with precision. This in turn leads to diversity in the understanding of the concept itself.

Empathy has many advantages, but also certain limits. One of the benefits is the ability to better understand interpersonal relationships, which enables better anticipation and empathetic responses to the emotions of others, thus contributing to better interpersonal communication. It enables us to recognize moments when our actions are at odds with the expectations and needs of others and allows us to adjust our behavior accordingly.[18] Empathy therefore contributes significantly to

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16 Verducci, "A conceptual history of empathy," 64.

17 Jean Decety and Claire Holvoet, "The emergence of empathy: A developmental neuroscience perspective," *Developmental Review* 62 (December 2021): 1, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2021.100999.

18 June Tangeny and Ronda L. Dearing, *Shame and Guilt* (New York: Guilford Press, 2002), 79; Stein, *On the problem of Empathy*, 88–89.

moral judgment. It is often understood to be synonymous with compassionate and attentive listening, but it is not necessarily always associated with a positive attitude—empathy can also be used manipulatively, for example, to humiliate or devalue another person.[19] It can also lead to unpleasant emotional experiences that the observer does not want, for example, in situations in which they identify too closely with the experience of another person and thus lose their sense of self and the boundary between themselves and that person. In such cases, we can no longer speak of genuine empathy, as it is essential for a person to maintain their own identity and differentiation in relation to the experience of the other.[20] The essence of empathy, then, is the ability to put oneself in another's shoes and gain insights that are almost equivalent to one's own experience, but this process must always be accompanied by the condition of "as if," i.e., with the awareness of the distinction between one's own experience and that of the other. Empathy requires a differentiated self, as well as the ability to adapt, which enables the individual to empathize with the perspective of the other while maintaining a sense of the similarity and difference between the self and the other.[21]

Empathy comes from a genuine sense of what we have in common, of feelings and thoughts that we can share. It is not simply a matter of projecting our own thoughts and ideas onto another person or identifying with them. Empathy goes beyond a one-sided internal psychological experience; it is always an intersubjective phenomenon in which a deeper understanding of the other's state of mind emerges.[22] In such a process of entering into the inner world of another person, we attune ourselves to different shades of feelings and meanings and to the essence of the other's current experience. Empathic contact connects us

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[19] Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy* (London: Vintage, 2016), 197–201.

[20] Margaret S. Warner, "Does empathy cure? A theoretical consideration of empathy, processing, and personal narrative," in *Empathy Reconsidered: New Directions in Psychotherapy*, ed. Arthur C. Bohart and Leslie S. Greenberg (Washington: American Psychological Association, 1997), 126.

[21] Patricia DeYoung, *Relational Psychotherapy: A Primer* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2003), 55.

[22] Marion F. Solomon, "Countertransference and empathy in couples therapy," in *Countertransference in Couples Therapy*, ed. Marion F. Solomon and Judith P. Siegel (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1997), 24.

on a deeper level with the emotional and cognitive world of another person. There are several ways to establish empathic contact or attunement—for example, through attentive listening, being present at a particular event, observing verbal and non-verbal communication, becoming aware of one's own inner reactions, and continually checking the accuracy of our understanding of the other person.[23] Although some of these steps can be taken consciously and intentionally in relationships, true empathy is always a spontaneous and unplanned experience.

Trevarthen[24] points out that human beings possess a universal capacity for mutual understanding, the core of which is the direct, non-verbal, and spontaneous ability of the self to connect with the self of another. This direct perception of another person occurs constantly and mostly unconsciously, as we rarely consciously focus on being empathetic in everyday relationships. Depending on the circumstances, the nature of the experience, and the person we are in contact with, we are more or less interested in their inner world. However, it is always a process that has a strong sensory dimension—it goes beyond the mere cognitive processing of information. True and complete empathy is never just a cognitive activity. Empathy encompasses all sensory perceptions, including smell, sight, and hearing, and as such is always physical and experiential—it represents the holistic experience of the whole person.[25]

Based on various findings, four important conditions for an authentic empathic experience have been identified. First, the individual must be tangibly open—able to recognize subtle emotional expressions in others. Secondly, the ability to maintain a reflective distance is essential—the ability to distinguish between one's own feelings and those of others. Thirdly, an ethical orientation that sees the other not as an object but as a mysterious, unique being is essential. And fourthly, a

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23 Simonič, *Empatija*, 137–138.

24 Colwyn Trevarthen, "The self born in intersubjectivity: The psychology of an infant communicating," in *The Perceived Self. Ecological and Interpersonal Sources of Self-knowledge*, ed. Urlic Neisser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 121.

25 John Shlien, "Empathy in psychotherapy: A vital mechanism? Yes. Therapist's conceit? All too often. By itself enough? No.," in *Empathy Reconsidered: New Directions in Psychotherapy*, ed. Arthur C. Bohart and Leslie S. Greenberg (Washington: American Psychological Association, 1997), 77–79.

comprehensive empathic experience can only arise in a space of reciprocity—in the mutual recognition and respect for the other as an equal subject.

Empathy is therefore not just a psychological function, but a way of being that characterizes our shared world. In today's society, characterized by accelerated life dynamics and frequent emotional distance, empathy remains one of the fundamental categories of humanity. Its value lies not only in understanding others, but also in deepening our understanding of ourselves. In relation to others, whom we do not control but accept in their otherness, empathy opens up the space for genuine encounters and ethical responsibility.

Empathy as an Embodied Experience

Empathy is not only a mental process, but often takes place through our bodies as well—in the form of spontaneous reactions, facial expressions, posture, tone of voice, and movement. This brings us to the core of understanding empathy as an embodied experience. Empathy is a deeply physical, embodied, and interpersonal experience. The body of another is not just a sign, but the content of empathy. Through the physical response, a direct connection is made—without simulation or delay of interpretation. The true meaning of empathy, then, lies in the bodily presence and affective resonance that simultaneously preserves the difference between two subjects and allows empathy to function as "I and you."[26]

The phenomenological tradition emphasizes that other people are not just objects of our perception, but living, independent beings who reveal themselves to us through bodily expression. In her doctoral thesis *On the Problem of Empathy* (1917), Edith Stein defines empathy as the way in which other people are given to us as bearers of consciousness—not just as representations, but as directly experientially present in their otherness. According to her understanding, empathic perception arises from the physical presence of the other person, through which we realize that they carry feelings, will, and thoughts within them. Facial

[26] Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 130–132.

expressions, body posture, and tone of voice therefore directly evoke our understanding without us having to draw rational conclusions. The crucial point here is that empathy is not synonymous with identification—the difference between our own experience and that of another remains; we recognize the emotions of the other as theirs, not as our own.[27] Dan Zahavi[28] points out that empathy is not just the experience of another, but is crucial to the constitution of the self. Empathy is a form of awareness of another in which the subject does not lose their own perspective but is still able to directly experience the experience of another. The physical self enables a pre-reflective experience of the other—when we perceive the emotional state of another, we experience it directly as the other, not as our own. Empathy does not mean the fusion of subjects, but rather the establishment of contact in an "I-Thou" relationship in which both subjects remain whole and separate. Like Edith Stein, Zahavi emphasizes the difference between empathy and identification—empathy does not mean that we become the Other, but that we perceive the Other as Other, but still as a sentient subject who is experientially present.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty also fits into this line of thought with his concept of intercorporality. In *Phenomenology of Perception*,[29] he emphasizes that social understanding takes place at the level of bodily coexistence—our living and sentient body establishes a relationship with the body of another even before reflection or language take place. This is not simply a matter of mirroring, but of actively sensing the other person in our own body: if I see sadness in another person's face, my body reacts with corresponding micro-movements and thus creates direct sensory access to their inner self. So when we observe another body, its motor structure, we actually experience its action from within, as if on some level we were both present in the same body movements at the same time. Thomas Fuchs[30] goes even further and develops the concepts of interaffectivity and primary empathy, which describe the

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27 Stein, *On the problem of Empathy*, 48–52.

28 Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other*, 130–132.

29 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1974), 251–254.

30 Thomas Fuchs, "Levels of empathy—Primary, extended, and reiterated empathy," in *Empathy: Epistemic Problems and Cultural-historical Perspectives of a Cross-disciplinary Concept*, ed.

spontaneous coordination of physical and emotional states between people. Fuchs emphasizes that empathy often takes place on a pre-reflective level, where the body reacts to the body: micro-expressions, posture, breathing, or the tone of the other person's voice trigger immediate physical-affective reactions within us. In this way, the physical presence of the other person enters our experience, not as an object, but as a resonating body with which we share a common emotional dynamic.[31]

Contemporary psychology and neuroscience also emphasize the importance of physicality for empathy. Mirror neurons play a key role here. They enable us to activate similar areas in our brain when we observe the actions or facial expressions of another person, as if we were performing the same actions ourselves. This mechanism creates the biological basis for what we call affective resonance in psychology—the physical echo of another person's emotions in our own nervous system. This supports the phenomenological intuition about the immediacy of empathic experience. Discoveries about mirror neurons have shown that certain neurons are activated both when performing and observing a particular action, allowing an implicit understanding of the other person's intentions and emotional state without conscious analysis.[32] These findings confirm that mirror neurons are an important neurobiological mechanism for understanding the intentions and emotions of other people.

The system of mirror neurons thus represents the biological (physical) basis for empathy, compassion, and interpersonal harmony. It enables our brain to go through similar processes as the person we are watching, listening to, or reading about, which is the basis for establishing intersubjective contact.[33] Although some scientists have pointed

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Vanessa Lux and Sigrid Weigel (London: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer Nature, 2017), 31–41, https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1057/978-1-137-51299-4_2.

[31] Thomas Fuchs and Sabine C. Koch, "Embodied affectivity: On moving and being moved," *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (June 2014): 3–5, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00508.

[32] Joachim Bauer, *Warum ich fühle, was du fühlst* (Hamburg: Hoffman und Campe Verlag, 2006), 22–24; Gallese, "The roots of empathy: The shared manifold hypothesis and the neural basis of intersubjectivity," 173–174.

[33] Daniel N. Stern, *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life* (New York: W. W. Nornton & Company, 2004), 78–79.

out that the role of mirror neurons may be somewhat overestimated, as they do not explain all aspects of empathy, their function remains essential for understanding basic emotional perception and interpersonal connection.[34]

Developmental psychology also shows that empathy develops very early and that the physical dimension plays a key role. Even newborns spontaneously imitate the facial expressions of adults, which indicates a physical basis for intersubjectivity. The so-called affective synchronization between mother and infant (coordination of movements, facial expressions, speech, and emotions), which cannot take place without the physical presence of the caregiver, is the basis for the later development of empathy. This can be described as "primary intersubjectivity," in which communication is not cognitive but physical, rhythmic, and emotional. Trevarthen,[35] for example, says that intersubjectivity is built into the child's body from birth. Children are born with a motivation that enables them to communicate their needs, intentions, and emotions through a particular form of conversation (protoconversation) and thereby elicit a response from other people. Protoconversation does not take place on a verbal level, but is an interaction that takes place through a series of vocal, mimic, and motor expressions in which the mother and child together create something that resembles a conversation. Therefore, we cannot ignore the importance of the body and the physical dimension in the context of primary subjectivity.

Meltzoff and Moore[36] argue that early intersubjectivity in children is based on temporal coordination, joint attention, and the search for social contact, all of which require physical presence. They emphasize that the imitation of facial gestures and sounds is intentional and has a deep communicative meaning that enables children to compare themselves with others. Through imitation and contact, children learn to

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[34] Gallese, "The roots of empathy," 175.

[35] Colwyn Trevarthen, "The concept and foundations of infant intersubjectivity," in *Intersubjective Communication and Emotion in Early Ontogeny*, ed. Stein Bråten (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 16–26.

[36] Andrew N. Meltzoff and Keith M. Moore, "Infant intersubjectivity: Broadening the dialogue to include imitation, identity and intention," in *Intersubjective Communication and Emotion in Early Ontogeny*, ed. Stein Bråten (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 48–62.

distinguish others as individuals and to recognize both differences and connections. Daniel N. Stern also presents a complex and very subtle aspect of the development of the intersubjective world based on research findings (especially observations of interactions between children and parents). In his book *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*,[37] he explains the development of a child's sense of self from birth onwards. He is interested in how a person's awareness of themselves develops. He focuses on the preverbal phase, in which he states that the attentive and empathetic attitude of the parent/caregiver toward the child is essential for the development of the self. Central to his work is the idea that children gradually develop a sense of self by developing generalized patterns of experience of themselves in lively physical interaction with others. In this process, a sense of self gradually emerges, and everything that emerges remains active and in dynamic interaction with what came before. The development of the child's understanding of their own and others' personal experiences and the differentiation between them are vital for empathy.

So we can see that physicality is a very important dimension in the development of empathy and the subsequent full empathic experience. Dan Zahavi[38] emphasizes the importance of physicality for empathy and argues that our bodily experiences are the basis for understanding the emotions and intentions of others. From this perspective, empathy is not just a cognitive process, but is deeply rooted in our bodily experiences, which shape the way we experience and connect with others. Empathic perception therefore begins at the level of the "meeting of bodies," where shared experiences are shaped by direct physical interactions. For example, early bonding between mother and child during pregnancy and infancy is a prototype of embodied empathy.[39] Our physical state significantly influences our ability to empathize. Physical sensations, which are regulated by the autonomic nervous system, are crucial for perceiving and interpreting the emotions of others. When

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[37] Daniel Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

[38] Dan Zahavi, "Empathy, embodiment and interpersonal understanding: From Lipps to Schutz," *Inquiry* 53, no. 3 (2010): 285–306, https://doi.org/10.1080/00201741003784663.

[39] Anna Ciaunica, "The 'Meeting of Bodies': Empathy and basic forms of shared experiences," *Topoi* 38 (August 2019): 185–186, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-017-9500-x.

we ourselves are physically in balance, it is easier for us to recognize others and respond compassionately to them.[40]

This embodied and interactive understanding of others is also supported by Gallagher,[41] who opposes traditional "mind-to-mind" models. Rather than limiting himself to theories of the mind or mere simulations in mirror neurons, he emphasizes the direct interaction that plays a central (though not exclusive) role in our ability to understand other people. In normal situations, direct attention focused on the shared world is sufficient to understand others. Normal social interaction is based on physical presence and a shared context in which everything we need to understand another person is already present in their actions and in our shared world. Gallagher explains that our perception of others comes from primary and secondary intersubjectivity, which involves direct perceptual and motor dialogue, not just inference. The embodied practices of primary and secondary intersubjectivity, which involve direct perception and pragmatic contextualization, clearly contradict the claims of mind and simulation theories. The basis of social perception, then, is the encounter between two bodies and minds in a relationship that already contains the notion of other minds. Empathy and understanding for others are based on active interpersonal relationships—in which people look at, touch, and act together—and not just on processing other people's ideas. The body and context are inextricably linked to the process of cognition, which is consistent with the phenomenological findings of Merleau-Ponty, Zahavi, and Fuchs on embodied empathy.

Phenomenological and psychological theories increasingly converge in the view that empathy is not just a mental construct or imaginary capacity, but rather an embodied, sensory, and social experience. The presence of another body (its posture, its voice, and its gaze) is not only a trigger, but also the content of the empathic experience. The other person's body speaks and our body responds. This inter-body dynamic

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[40] Fabio Marson et al., "When the body fosters empathy: The interconnectivity between bodily reactivity, meditation, and embodied abstract concepts," *Progress in Brain Research* 287 (2024): 217, https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.pbr.2024.05.004.

[41] Shaun Gallagher, "Empathy, simulation, and narrative," *Science in Context* 25, no. 3 (2012): 355–381, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889712000117.

creates a space in which we can not only understand the other person, but also experience them as a subject. Although this focus on bodily experience clearly confirms the importance of physicality for empathy, some authors[42] point out that cognitive processes alone can also enable a certain form of empathy, especially in situations where physical presence is not possible. In today's forms of digital communication, the physical dimension is often lost, which raises important questions about the nature and depth of empathic experience in virtual and digital environments. What happens to empathy when there is no longer a direct physical encounter? How do the dynamics of emotional understanding and response change when gaze, voice, and posture can no longer directly address our bodies? This absence of physicality prompts us to reflect on how digital interaction is reshaping the foundations of interpersonal relationships.

Empathy and Embodiment in the Digital Communication Environment

Over the past two decades, social media and digital technology have radically changed the way we communicate, build, and maintain relationships. Although these platforms enable fast and efficient connectivity, concerns have been raised about their impact on the quality of interpersonal relationships, particularly with regard to the depersonalization of communication and the reduction of empathy. Modern humans are no longer bound to physical presence in order to connect with others. Digital communication offers forms of "networked presence," but this is often fragmented and disjointed. Digital communication (from text messages to video calls) fundamentally changes our sensory perception of others. Technology fosters the illusion of closeness, but without sensory complexity.[43] In this environment, the experience of empathy often depends on content and symbols (e.g., emoticons,

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[42] Simon Surguladze and Dessa Bergen-Cico, "Editorial: Empathy in a broader context: Development, mechanisms, remediation," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 11 (2020): 529, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2020.00529.

[43] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 1–8.

reactions, and likes) that mimic emotions but are not connected to physical experiences.

Digital communication often lacks non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language, which are crucial for interpreting the emotional states and intentions of the dialogue partner. This reduced variety of communicative cues can lead to a process of depersonalization, where interactions become more superficial and less personal. As a result, the sense of interpersonal connection diminishes, which can contribute to a greater perception of loneliness.[44] In addition, the asynchronous nature of digital channels and the lack of direct contact make it more difficult to build and maintain deeper, authentic relationships. Communication via text messages or posts on social media often does not allow for an immediate response or two-way interaction, which exacerbates the feeling of alienation. The lack of social cues in these online environments limits the activation of brain regions associated with empathy, which can promote less considerate and, in extreme cases, even antisocial behavior.[45]

Numerous studies warn that the intensive use of social networks and digital technologies can contribute to a depersonalization of communication, which can have negative consequences for the development of empathy and the quality of interpersonal relationships. A link has been found between problematic social media use and reduced empathy, indicating a possible erosion of basic social skills.[46] Research shows that face-to-face communication, with its ability to convey implicit information and non-verbal cues, allows for much more effective interaction and expression than virtual communication.[47] The replacement of

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[44] Brian A. Primack et al., "Social Media use and perceived social isolation among young adults in the U.S.," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 53, no. 1 (2017): 1–3, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2017.01.010.

[45] Maria Tavares and Ben Rein, "The virtual disengagement hypothesis: A neurophysiological framework for reduced empathy on social media," *Cognitive, Affective & Behavioral Neuroscience* 24, no. 6 (2024): 965–967, https://doi.org/10.3758/s13415-024-01212-w.

[46] Veronica Márquez-Hernández et al., "Problematic mobile phone use, nomophobia and decision-making in nursing students mobile and decision-making in nursing students," *Nurse Education in Practice* 49 (November 2020): 102910, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2020.102910.

[47] Anneli Eddy, "Is technology killing human emotion? How computer-mediated communication compares to face-to-face interactions," *Mensch und Computer* (2019): 527–530, https://doi.org/10.1145/3340764.3344451.

face-to-face interactions with technology-mediated interactions leads to greater social disengagement and even dehumanization as communication loses its personal dimension. The growing reliance on digital technologies creates a peculiar paradox where we personalize our devices while depersonalizing human interactions and treating others like machines.[48]

However, the lifeworld has not lost its fundamental role even in the age of widespread digitalization; individuals still experience life from a personal, internal perspective. This perspective is inextricably linked to their physical (embodied) presence.[49] Nevertheless, with the use of digital communication, we can speak of a loss of presence in today's culture. The body disappears behind the screen or digital media, and presence becomes dependent on mediation by other media and is no longer tangible. In the context of digital communication, this means that the emotional reaction of the other person, which is important for empathy and which we recognize in their body language, can be transformed into something algorithmic (mechanical, unfeeling, and without affect).[50] In digital communication, the body is no less real, but it is different. Can such interaction and contact generate the same degree of empathy as when the biological body is present? Embodiment is still crucial for full human empathy as it enables affective, somatic, and sensory resonance with others. In digital communication, we usually lose this dimension or replace it with reduced signs. Empathy without physical presence is of course possible, but it is partially impaired—less profound and less intuitive. Researchers have found that cognitive empathy (understanding the thoughts and perspectives of others) is more

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[48] Samuel Laura and Fraser Douglas Hannam, "The technologisation of education and the pathway to depersonalisation and dehumanisation," *Asian Journal of Social Science Studies* 2, no. 2 (2017): 1–8, https://doi.org/10.20849/ajsss.v2i2.155.

[49] Branko Klun, "Problem religioznega izkustva v digitalno transformiranem svetu: eksistencialno fenomenološki pristop," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 84, no. 1 (2024): 31, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2024/01/Klun.

[50] Hans Urlich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 921; Bojan Žalec, "Ali je umetna inteligenca inteligenca v pravem pomenu besede? Vprašanje psihičnih značilnosti in splošnosti," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 83, no. 4 (2023): 818, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2023/04/Zalec.

common in the digital environment, while emotional empathy, which depends on direct physical emotional signals, remains more limited.[51]

Conclusion

While digital technology enables long-distance connection, the absence of physical presence raises the question of how to maintain the depth and authenticity of empathy. Empathy is not just a mental process or an abstract cognitive ability, it is an embodied experience that unfolds through our bodies: Facial expressions, posture, tone of voice, and even micro-movements that create a direct affective connection between people. Another's body is not just an object of perception, but an active resonance that allows us to feel and understand their experience in real time.

Phenomenological and (neuro)psychological findings emphasize that at its deepest level, empathy arises from inter-bodily affective resonance, which includes both the spontaneous coordination of bodily states and subtle bodily responses triggered by others. Mirror neurons and developmental psychology confirm that this bodily dimension is fundamental to the formation of empathy from early childhood. Both physical presence and interactive bodily dynamics are essential for building a genuine empathic relationship.

However, in the digital environment, this physical contact is often lost or significantly reduced, posing a challenge to empathic connection. Communicating via screens can feel depersonalized as physical cues (facial expression, tone of voice, posture, etc.) are not directly accessible or are limited. If we are to use digital technologies empathically, we need to (1) supplement them with physical presence wherever possible to maintain a direct bodily-affective connection, (2) develop more sensory-enriched interfaces that seek to preserve or replace physical cues (e.g., video calls, virtual reality, and advanced sensory systems),

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[51] Shir Genzer, Yoad Ben Adiva and Anat Perry, *Empathy: From Perception to Understanding and Feeling Others' Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Regine Rørstad Torbjørnsen and Inês Hipólito, "Widening the screen: embodied cognition and audiovisual online social interaction in the digital age," *AI & Society* 40, no. 1 (2025): 23–26, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-023-01844-5.

and (3) cultivate digital mindfulness, i.e., the awareness that we ourselves communicate through screens as holistic beings who need more than just words or images. By enriching digital communication with embodied approaches and an awareness of the importance of physical presence, we can prevent depersonalization and a decline in empathy. In an age where screens often replace face-to-face contact, a return to embodiment and inter-bodily experiences is crucial for preserving humanity, real connection, and genuine empathy.

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