

Taking empathy online

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Abstract: Despite its long history of investigating sociality, phenomenology has, to date, said little about *online* sociality. The phenomenological tradition typically claims that *empathy* is the fundamental way in which we experience others and their experiences. While empathy is discussed almost exclusively in the context of face-to-face interaction, I claim that we can empathetically perceive others and their experiences in certain online situations. Drawing upon the phenomenological distinction between the physical, objective body and the expressive, lived body, I: (i) highlight that empathy involves perceiving the other's expressive, lived body, (ii) show that the lived body is not tied to the physical body and that empathy can take place outside of face-to-face interactions, and (iii) argue that the lived body can enter online space and is empathetically available to others there. I explore two ways in which the other's lived body enters online space and can be empathetically perceived: first, in cases where our face-to-face encounter is technologically-mediated over video link and, second, by showing how the other's texts, as speech, can form part of the other's lived body. Investigating empathy online not only furthers our understanding of online encounters but also leads to a refined conception of empathy more generally.

Keywords: phenomenology, empathy, online, sociality, lived body, expressivity

Introduction

A huge number of my interpersonal encounters take place online. I spend a lot of time on WhatsApp chatting to friends (both individually and in groups); I use Messenger in a similar manner; I am an avid sharer of photos on Instagram; I sometimes peruse Facebook; I regularly Skype, Zoom and Houseparty with friends; I email colleagues; I've been known to play World of Warcraft via an avatar; and, very occasionally, I even use my phone to call people over WiFi. While I may be betraying just how often I encounter people online, I am certainly not an outlier here. Indeed, as I am making the final edits to this paper during a Covid-19 lockdown in the UK, this is currently the norm for many of us. As Miller puts it, 'the spaces of networked digital technologies are no longer liminal since they are now part-and-parcel of the experience of everyday life' (2012, 266; also see Miller 2016) (and this is particularly the experience of everyday life in lockdown).

After an initial wave of optimism that praised the internet for creating a utopian hub for social encounters (e.g. Benkler 2006; Rainie and Wellman 2012; Rheingold 2000), there has been a pessimistic turn in the way that many people think of online sociality (e.g. Dotson 2017; Turkle 2015, 2017). Whether one remains optimistic about online sociality or embraces this more pessimistic outlook, what underlies this debate is a more fundamental question about *how* we encounter others online in the first place. What does it mean to encounter the other when we are no longer face-to-face but are mediated by our screens?

Despite a long history of interest in intersubjectivity and sociality, phenomenology has, to date, said relatively little about interpersonal relations on the internet. Recent compendiums on the phenomenology of sociality, for example, do not include any chapters on the matter (e.g. Dolezal and Petherbridge 2017; Szanto and

Moran 2015; Salice and Schmid 2016).¹ This paper serves not only to show that empathy (a notion at the heart of the phenomenology of sociality) takes place online but opens the door to a rich array of phenomenological investigations in relation to our experiences online. Moreover, by considering whether empathy takes place online, we are forced to refine and further our understanding of empathy more generally.

The phenomenological tradition typically claims that *empathy* is the fundamental way in which we experience others and their experiences. ‘Empathy’ is used as a technical term to refer to the way that others’ experiences can be directly perceptually available to me through their expressive behaviour (e.g. Husserl 1993, 2006; Fuchs 2014; Krueger and Overgaard 2012; Scheler 2008; Schutz 1967; Stein 1989; Zahavi 2001, 2014). This is not to imply that our bodies merely give inferential clues to others about our hidden inner mental life. Rather, it is the claim that our bodily expressions are, properly-speaking, constitutive parts of our experience and, thus, render experience something that, at least sometimes, can be directly perceived by others.

Given the emphasis on the role of the expressive body, it is perhaps not surprising that empathy theorists² within phenomenology almost exclusively discuss

¹ For an interesting article bucking this trend, see Kekki’s recent phenomenological exploration of how we authentically encounter the other in the context of online learning. While Kekki (2020) does not specifically consider whether we empathetically encounter the other online, she presents a persuasive account of how we encounter the expressive other in the online sphere.

² Note that, throughout this article, when I refer to ‘empathy theorists’ or ‘empathy proponents’, I am specifically referring to those working with *the phenomenological concept of empathy*, rather than to empathy more broadly or colloquially construed. The word empathy is used

empathy in the context of face-to-face encounters. As such, it might seem that the phenomenological concept of empathy has little to contribute to discussions of online sociality. Yet, the assumption that empathy only occurs face-to-face rests on an unjustified restriction of expressivity to the physical body. Drawing upon the classic phenomenological distinction between the objective, physical body and the expressive, lived body, I argue that the expressive, lived body is not bound to our skin and, therefore, allows for empathy to occur ‘at a distance’. Having liberated empathy from a strictly face-to-face interaction, I turn to the question of whether empathy can happen online. I claim that even though online sociality is often depicted as *disembodied* communication (e.g. Fuchs 2014), our lived bodies can and do enter online space. I, therefore, present the novel position that we have direct empathetic access to others and their experiences even when their bodies are technologically-mediated.

In section 1, I provide an overview of the phenomenological concept of empathy. In section 2, I discuss how the lived body is not tied to the physical, objective body. I argue that, even in our offline lives, we can empathetically perceive others ‘at a distance’ from their physical bodies. In section 3, I outline why it might seem that empathy drops out of the picture when we go online. In section 4, I explore two ways in which we find the lived body online. First, where our face-to-face encounters are technologically-mediated, for instance via a video call. Second, where we experience the other’s lived, expressive body in text. In section 5, I explore and respond to some initial challenges to my claim that empathy occurs online. I conclude that not only do

within social cognition in a variety of (sometimes contradictory) ways (see Zahavi and Overgaard 2012) and I do not intend to refer to all theorists who think that some kind of empathy might be involved in social cognition.

concepts from the phenomenological tradition shed light on online sociality but that these very concepts are, in turn, enriched by such considerations.

1. The phenomenological notion of empathy

The term *empathy* is used by both classic and contemporary phenomenologists to pick out a special form of other-directed act (e.g. Husserl 1993, 2006; Jardine 2015; Magrì and Moran 2018; Overgaard 2018; Scheler 2008; Schutz 1967; Stein 1989; Szanto 2015; Zahavi 2001, among many others). Empathy is typically taken to be a perception-based experience, where the other and their experience are given to me through the ‘field of expression’ that is their lived body (Schutz 1967, 22). Contra other theories of social cognition, phenomenologists do not take their starting point to be that others’ experiences are essentially unobservable. Such a starting point rests on the assumption that experiences are something that happen *inside* a person, hidden behind the veil of our bodies; thus, rendering another’s experience inaccessible to us. This ‘Unobservability Thesis’ is frequently taken as the very motivation behind the problem of other minds (e.g. Goldman 2012, 402). Two prominent social cognition theories that attempt to respond to the Unobservability Thesis are Theory Theory and Simulation Theory:

Theory Theory asserts that our other-understanding is rooted in our ability to construct theories of mind about other people based upon their behaviour, which we then employ in order to infer what they might be experiencing (e.g. Gopnik and Wellman 1992).

Simulation Theory asserts that our other-understanding is rooted in our ability to simulate the experiences or feelings of another and project them onto them (e.g. Goldman 2012).

Empathy proponents, however, rebut the Unobservability Thesis on the grounds that we are essentially embodied subjects. Empathy theorists claim that at least some aspects of another's experience are perceptually available to us, as these experiences are embodied in their expressive behaviour.³ This is not meant to imply that when I encounter another person that I see bodily changes which merely indicate that they are undergoing some kind of inner experience. Rather, the claim is that when I experience another person, I encounter them as an embodied subject. Their bodily expressivity is a constitutive *part* of their experience, not just a behavioural cue (Krueger and Overgaard 2012). When I see you smile, I do not infer from this that you are happy. I *see* your happiness *in* your smile; your happiness is perceptually given to me 'directly, unmediated, and non-inferentially' (Zahavi 2014, 125).

Phenomenologists often point out that social cognition theories that rest on inference or simulation actually presuppose the very experiences they are meant to explain (e.g. Scheler 2008, 7; Stein 1989, 12). For, in order for us to know when to employ Theory Theory or Simulation Theory, we must already have recognised the other as an experiencing subject to whom we ascribe – or onto whom we project – experiences in the first place; must have recognised the other *as* a subject and their bodily actions *as* expressive. Consequently, empathy is presented not simply as *a* form

³ Although the most common examples of empathy refer to emotional experiences (such as seeing someone's happiness in their smile), other experiences can be empathetically perceived (such as seeing someone's intention to pick up their cup when seeing their hand move towards it). I, therefore, use 'experience' here broadly.

of other-understanding but *the* fundamental form of other-understanding (Scheler 2008; Stein 1989; Zahavi 2014). The question I pursue below is whether this fundamental form of other-understanding is also found in our online encounters.

Importantly, while empathy gives us access to the other's experience, this is not to say that we have *full* access to their experience. If I see your smile and empathetically perceive your happiness, that is not to say that I perceive your entire experience of being happy. That I do not have full first-personal access to your happiness is precisely what makes it an experience of *your* happiness and not of *my* happiness (to which I do have full first-personal access). As such, empathy is understood as *my* experience of *your* experience; a structure that preserves the asymmetry between first-personal experience and a second- or third-personal experience of another's experience. Nor do I need to share your happiness, I can perceive your happiness while remaining grumpy myself (Scheler 2008; Stein 1989; Zahavi and Rochat 2015).

While proposing empathy as the fundamental way of encountering others and their experiences, we should not mistake empathy theorists as claiming that empathy is our only way of grasping the experience of others (Zahavi 2001, 2014). I might empathetically grasp your disappointment when perceiving your furrowed brow and slouched shoulders but infer that this disappointment relates to the publication of a job-list on which your name did not appear. Nor is the empathy theorist claiming that all of another's experiences are perceptually available. It is possible that you are disappointed about the job-list but that your experience is not expressed in your bodily comportment and is, therefore, not empathetically available to me. Finally, it should be noted that what is being claimed is that empathy is *how* we experience others. This should not be mistaken for a claim about how *well* we do this. I can be entirely wrong in my empathetic grasp of you. For instance, I might mistake your grimace for a smile.

Empathy is like other perceptual experiences in this regard; just because I see something in a particular way does not guarantee its veridicality. Consequently, empathy is meant to capture the fundamental way that we encounter others as embodied and experiencing subjects, but it is not infallible nor is it the only instrument in our social cognition tool-kit.

2. Empathy, expressivity and the body

2.1. The objective body and the lived body

Before exploring whether empathy can happen online, it is worth expanding upon the relationship between empathy, expressivity and the body. Often not much more is said about this beyond the claim that empathy involves perceiving the other's experiences through the expressive bodily behaviour of the other. Due to this emphasis on the body, we can understand why empathy is usually taken to require a face-to-face interaction. However, by digging deeper into how empathy, expressivity and the body relate, the door is opened for unsettling this assumption.

To empathetically perceive another person involves my having an experience of their experience which is perceptually given to me through their expressive body. Common examples of empathy are of seeing someone's happiness in their smile, their anger in their clenched fists, their sadness in their tears (e.g. Scheler 2008; Stein 1989; Zahavi 2014). What is important to note is that while being face-to-face with another can give rise to an empathetic experience of them, it need not do. I can, at least potentially, perceive another's body without having an empathetic experience of them. To understand this, we need to introduce a classic distinction made in phenomenology between the *objective body* and the *lived body*. This distinction highlights that there are

two *ways* in which we can experience the body, not a claim that we have two different *types* of body (Gallagher and Zahavi 2013, 136).⁴

The body, in one sense, is just an object in the world like other objects. It has extension, mass, colour, is subject to the laws of physics, and so on. This is the objective, physical body. I experience my body as an object if, for instance, I examine the texture of the skin on my arm or measure it in some way. However, I also experience my body as a subject. It is not just an object of experience; I am a bodily subject of experience. It is this lived body that phenomenology brings to the fore. When, for example, I reach out to grab my mug, I do not pick up my arm and move it towards the mug. I simply extend my arm without thinking about it. Due to processes such as proprioception and kinesthesia, I am always aware of where my limbs are and what I can do with them without needing to explicitly locate them. This is because my lived body is always given to me experientially from a first-person perspective. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, 'I am my body' (2012, 151) and I experience it as the centre of my agency and experience. Indeed, that I am a lived body is what enables me to experience my body as an object in the first place; for me to perceive my body as an object, I also must be the subject perceiving it as such.

Crucial for our purposes is that I can experience the other's body either as an objective body or a lived body. Think of a surgeon cutting open a body to take out the appendix, a tailor measuring someone's waistband, an artist examining the bright green of someone's eyes in order to create a certain shade of paint. In these cases, the surgeon, the tailor and the painter are all attending to the objective body.

⁴ For an interesting discussion of whether we should conceive of the objective body and the lived body as wholly distinct, see Legrand 2010.

Empathy takes place when perceiving someone's *lived* body. For example, when I look into my sister's face and see tears falling down her cheeks, I experience her sadness through her expressive lived body. Remember, this is not an inferential claim – that I see her tears and infer from them that she is sad – but is a claim about how her sadness is given to me directly. I am not turned to her body as a physical object here. Rather, I have perceptual access to my sister's pain through her lived body. It is her lived body that I experience as a field of expressivity. When I see my sister's tears, I see her sadness; I am not turned to an objective, material body that is secreting water out of tear ducts.

Empathy, then, is intimately related to the lived body as something expressive. On the face of it, this accounts for why it is commonly supposed that empathy requires a face-to-face interaction. It might seem obvious that we must be able to *see* someone's physical body in order to see their expressive, lived body, e.g. to see smiles, tears, clenched fists. However, the lived body is not strictly tied to the objective, biological body (i.e. to the limits of skin and skull). Think, for example, of the voice. The voice, while issuing from their physical body, is not itself merely a distortion of bodily mass. It is part of the lived body but is not skin-bound; we do not hear someone speak by attending to the movement of their voice box. We can hear someone's voice even when we cannot see them. We should not interpret the idea of the lived body as *a field of expression*, then, as referring to expressivity that only plays across someone's skin. That we can perceive someone's expressive, lived body while not being in the same physical place as their objective body will prove particularly important when exploring the idea of online empathy.

That the lived body extends beyond skin and bone is also well-recognised in the phenomenological tradition where a part of the world is *incorporated* into someone's

lived body. The archetypal example of this is Merleau-Ponty's description of the blind man and his cane. Merleau-Ponty describes how a blind man uses a cane to navigate his way down a cobbled street, using the cane as way of feeling and navigating the stones in front of him. Merleau-Ponty notes how:

[t]he blind man's cane has ceased to be an object for him, it is no longer perceived for itself; rather, the cane's furthest point is transformed into a sensitive zone, it increases the scope and the radius of the act of touching and has become analogous to a gaze. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 144)

The blind man's lived body extends beyond his fingers to the tip of the cane, thus allowing the man to *feel* the cobbled street where the tip of the cane meets the stones. The cane is no longer experienced as an object that the blind man holds but as part of the experiential field of his lived body. Thus, the lived body, in certain circumstances, can include aspects of the world. This, as we will see, adds an additional layer of complexity to how we understand the lived body as something that could be perceptually available to another outside of the face-to-face encounter.

2.2. Beyond the face-to-face

Despite empathy and the lived body being two canonical concepts in the phenomenological tradition, that the lived body extends beyond the skin seems to have been forgotten by empathy literature. This has led to an overemphasis on the importance of being face-to-face with another in order for empathy to take place. Why has the question of whether empathy can take place outside of face-to-face interaction been typically overlooked? In large part, this can be attributed to the trend of talking about being able to 'see' someone's experiences. Examples of empathy abound with descriptions of seeing someone crying, blushing, smiling and scowling (e.g. Krueger and Overgaard 2012; Scheler 2008; Schutz 1967; Stein 1989; Zahavi 2001, 2014). Not

surprisingly, then, the framing of empathy in visual terms has resulted in a close connection between empathy and face-to-face encounters.

That empathy is perception-based does not restrict us to *visual* perception. Take my *hearing* someone's anger in their frustrated tone of voice. Expressivity is not something that just plays out across the surface of the skin. Indeed, we can empathetically perceive the other through their tone of voice when we cannot see them at all. We would not want to deny that a blind individual can empathetically experience others. We also want to allow that I can empathetically experience another's anger when they yell at me down the stairs. Being *face-to-face* with someone is not a necessary condition for empathy, even in these everyday contexts.

That the lived body can extend through incorporation also needs to be considered. If we can perceive incorporated objects as part of someone's lived body, they can also form part of the field of expression that is relevant for empathy. While this has not been discussed within empathy literature, it seems clear that we can empathetically perceive incorporated aspects of another's lived body. Imagine that I have been in an accident and lost my left arm. In its place, I have been fitted with a state-of-the-art prosthetic limb which I have become adept at using. Now suppose that you have just walked past my desk, knocked over my mug and spilt coffee all over my lecture notes. I jump up from my chair and shake my fists, both my flesh-and-blood fist and my prosthetic one, at you in annoyance. It seems appropriate to say that you empathetically perceive my annoyance in the shaking of my fists, both of them. It seems artificial to say that your empathy stops where my prosthetic limb starts. Rather, the field of expression that you are empathetically directed to encompasses my whole lived body, including both my physical body and my incorporated prosthetic limb. Aspects of

the world can, therefore, constitute part of someone's lived body and can be empathetically perceived by another.

The lived body, then, can be empathetically perceived 'at a distance' from the objective, physical body. This frees empathetic perception from taking place only within face-to-face interactions and opens the door to the question of whether empathy can take place online.

3. Empathy online: a dead-end?

That there has been next-to-no discussion of online empathy might be taken as an indication that this is simply a dead-end endeavour. Indeed, in one of the few phenomenological considerations of empathy online, Thomas Fuchs, in his article *The Virtual Other* (2014), rules out the possibility that empathy proper takes place online. According to Fuchs, when we go online, we lose our direct empathetic access to others as we no longer have perceptual access to the other's body. He states that online, '[i]nstead of interacting with embodied persons, we interact more and more with pictures and symbols' (2014, 167). As empathy involves perceiving the other's lived body, empathy is deemed impossible in this online world of 'disembodied communication' (*ibid.*). How, then, can we encounter others online when we leave our bodies behind?

Fuchs recognises that virtual communication can still be suffused with emotion. However, what he says is lacking is 'the direct feedback from the embodied contact, based on emotional cues and expressive gestures by which we perceive one another empathetically' (*ibid.*). Fuchs suggests that we make the mistake of thinking we encounter the other online as we engage in a kind of imaginative form of other-understanding, a quasi-empathy 'as if' we were really encountering the other. Instead of

really encountering the other online, Fuchs states that '[t]he other has become a projection surface, a product of my imagination' (2014, 168). He claims that we do not empathetically perceive the other's experience but project our expectations onto their communication. He contrasts this to face-to-face interactions, where one frequently is surprised by the other's experience (also see Staehler 2014).

This is quite a radical stance to adopt. For one, it seems at odds with our lived experience of online encounters. I suspect anyone who has had the misfortune of having an argument with someone over text or the fortune of having a romantic exchange, would strongly resist the idea that we only encounter an imagined other online; such interactions seem permeated with the emotions of the other person, emotions that can take us aback, that can teach us something about the other's experience. Yet, for Fuchs, these are nothing more than fictional emotions; emotions that I imagine and project onto the other based upon mere informational prompts (*ibid.*).

While we might want to resist Fuchs' conclusion that we only encounter ourselves online, the idea that in online space what takes place is 'disembodied communication' has some intuitive appeal. It seems a banality to point out that when I pick up my phone and open WhatsApp that I do not take my body online. This is exactly the point that Dreyfus makes when he states that when we enter online space 'we leave behind our emotional, intuitive, situated, vulnerable, embodied selves' (2008, 6). This abandonment of the body might seem like a knock-down argument against the idea of online empathy, pushing us to look for another method for analysing how we experience others online.

However, before throwing ourselves into formulating an alternative approach to online sociality, we need to re-examine what Fuchs and Dreyfus appear to be saying. The claim that these authors seem to be making is that because we cannot take our

physical bodies into online space, we cannot, therefore, encounter the other as an embodied subject online. Fuchs states that in ‘virtual worlds there is a suspension of immediate bodily experience, a disembodiment’ (Fuchs 2014, 165); while Dreyfus’ entire book is motivated by a concern about what happens when we enter online space and ‘the body goes’ (Dreyfus 2008, 7). They both seem to assume that because we leave behind our physical bodies when we enter online space, we become disembodied. But, as we have discussed, the physical, objective body is not the same thing as the lived body and the lived body is not tied to skin and bone. More needs to be said to justify the move from saying that the physical, objective body cannot enter online space to saying that the lived body cannot enter online space.

Simply put, there is a conflation of the objective body with the lived body in both Fuchs’ and Dreyfus’ accounts. As empathy involves perceiving the other as an embodied subject through the field of expression of their lived body, pointing out that the objective body is not online is not sufficient to rule out that empathy can occur online. The question that we need to return to, then, is whether the *lived* body can go online.

When pursuing this question, we must also be careful not to refer to online space as if it were one homogenous realm in which we have one style of interpersonal interaction (Krueger and Osler forthcoming). The internet houses numerous platforms offering different forms and styles of encounter: whether this is on live video, on text-based platforms, through avatars and so on. We are not talking about *the* online interpersonal encounter but various types of online encounters. While I cannot offer a full taxonomy of online encounters here, in the following, I focus on specific types of online encounter to motivate the case for online empathy.

4. Empathy online: two case studies

4.1. Skype: direct but technologically-mediated perception

I am skyping with Frida. When we are on a video call, rather than being physically face-to-face, our encounter is mediated by a pair of screens.⁵ Frida is not literally in front of me in a physical, flesh-and-blood sense. Yet, it seems strange to claim that we are not 'face-to-face'. There is her face on my screen. Can I empathetically perceive Frida's lived body here? It does not seem that Frida has incorporated her laptop's camera into her lived body; she does not experience the camera as part of her body in the same way as the blind man and his cane. So, when I perceive her face on my screen, I am not empathetically perceiving an incorporated part of her lived body. We might think that there is an analogy here to be made with empathetically hearing someone's anger while being in a different room. However, this doesn't straightforwardly fit either. Frida's body is not simply something that I am perceiving from far away. My perceptual access to her body is *mediated* by the screens, microphones and speakers between us.

The question, then, is whether we can empathetically perceive someone's lived body when our perceptual access to their body is technologically-mediated. I think the answer to this is clearly yes. I still experience Frida's expressive behaviour: I can see her happiness play out across her lips, her enthusiasm in her gesticulating hands, hear her amusement in her chuckling. Although there are screens mediating us, it is not to my screen that I am perceptually directed; rather, I am perceptually directed *at* Frida (Osler, 2019, 14). The screen is transparent in the sense that I am not attending to it as a

⁵ I take it that this example also applies to video link platforms such as Zoom, WhatsApp video, FaceTime, Houseparty, and so on.

screen but attending to Frida. While Frida's body in all its full physical corporeality is not in front of me, I experience her lived expressive body as in front of me.

There might be a concern here, though, that I do not really have access to Frida's lived body here but to an image or representation of Frida given to me via the video link. In Husserl's work *Phantasy, Image-Consciousness, and Memory* (2005), we find an in-depth analysis of image-consciousness that might be considered a challenge to my claim that I directly perceive Frida's expressive bodily gestures over Skype.⁶ Here, Husserl provides a detailed discussion of our perception of images, such as drawings, paintings, and photographs. In short, Husserl argues that when we look at an image of an individual we do not directly perceive the subject depicted in the image (what he calls the 'image subject') nor the material object that depicts the image (unless we are inspecting this material as an object), e.g. the photographic paper or canvas (what he calls the 'physical object'). Instead, Husserl claims that we are turned to the object depicted by the image (what he calls the 'image object'). He states that when we look at a photograph of a child, what we perceive 'is not the child itself but a photographic image' (2005, 20). Based on this analysis, one might claim that what I have access to on Skype is the *image* of Frida which, although mapping onto Frida's actual bodily expressions, is not in fact a perception *of Frida*. This seems to suggest that I cannot have direct empathetic perceptual access to Frida's lived body over Skype.⁷ The analysis that Husserl offers of image-consciousness is a complex and layered one, which deserves more careful attention than I can do justice to in this paper.

⁶ Thank you to the reviewer who helpfully summarized this particular concern and suggested including a more developed response to this challenge in this paper.

⁷ For an interesting discussion of how empathetic perception itself is akin to image-consciousness, see Luo (2017).

Nevertheless, I want to provide an initial response to a challenge posed along these lines.

There are a number of contrasts that Husserl draws between image-consciousness and ordinary perception.⁸ I want to highlight three of these contrasts here. First, Husserl claims that in ordinary perception we see the object as real and actual. In contrast, he states that when we look at an image, we do not posit the image object as real, as actually existing. When we are looking at a photograph of a child, we are not ‘deceived’ into thinking that we are perceiving a real child (Husserl 2005, 155). Second, Husserl points out how there is a conflict between what appears *in* the image and the surroundings of the image. In the image, we see, say, a child in a garden. But the photo itself is pinned to a wall, and the internal world of the photograph is at odds with my orange wall, the staircase in my house, and so on. The image ‘has its own space and time set apart from the space time of reality. It embraces a world internal to it and is discontinuous to the reality around it’ (Brough 2012a, 549). Finally, the image object, unlike objects of ordinary perception, is exhausted by its appearance. When looking at the child, I can only see what is presented to me (e.g. their face). It lacks the spatial horizons that ordinary objects have; I do not experience the image child as something that I can explore the back side of. Image objects are, as it were, characterized by a ‘what you see is what you get’ staticism. We do not, for instance, look at a photograph and have ‘expectations of movement and speech’ (Eldridge 2018, 576).

Importantly, I think that the three contrasts specified above do not (at least straightforwardly) apply to the case of Skype. First, unlike when I look at a photograph,

⁸ For a more detailed discussion of Husserl’s account of image-consciousness see: Brough 2012a, 2012b; Eldridge 2018; Luo 2017.

I do experience Frida as existing, as real. This is not just because I know that the image refers to or resembles a real person out there in the world. Rather, I experience myself as having access to the real Frida, existing in the present moment. Indeed, what our Skype example complicates is what we mean when we say that in ordinary perception we experience objects as *real* and *actually existing*. Unlike photographs, which capture the ‘That-has-been’ (Barthes 2000, 73) or the ‘not now’ (Husserl 2005, 155), when we talk on Skype, I experience Frida as she is in the present moment. This leads us to the second point. While a photograph has its own internal time and space, this again is not clearly the case on Skype. First, as mentioned, Skype does not present me with an image of a past-Frida, but with Frida as she currently is. Frida and I share the same temporal present. To borrow Schutz’s phrase, Frida and I ‘grow older together’ in a shared, lived time (1967, 103). Interestingly, I think this also applies to space. On Skype, I see Frida in her bedroom. Certainly, I am not *in* Frida’s bedroom with her, I am not sharing the same physical space as her. Yet, I am not presented with a flat, frozen space that lacks horizontal possibilities. Frida herself is not hemmed in or constrained by the space that I can see through my screen. The space that is framed on my screen does not stop at the edges of the screen. Frida can get up and walk out of frame or Frida can turn the screen so I might see another aspect of her room. This is more analogous to the experience of looking out of a window. When I look out into my garden, my view of the garden is framed by the window and the garden is, in some sense, discontinuous with the grey curtains and beige walls of my study. Yet, I do not see the garden as having its own ‘internal space’. What I see is a space of possibilities that I, currently, cannot physically access. What this suggests to me is that rather than seeing the screen as equivalent to a photograph that we see an image *in* it is more akin to a window that I see Frida *through*. This is also supported by the final point that I perceive Frida, unlike the

photographic image of the child, as having spatial horizons that can be explored. Part of my experience of Frida here on Skype is that she does have a back side that I can explore further (even if I cannot physically walk around her in actuality); I see a Frida who is not reduced to a mere appearance.

What I think this analysis reveals is that my screen operates more like a window than an image. I do not have an internally-referring space represented on my screen, rather I am given access to Frida's lived space, the space that she is currently occupying; a space that is within the horizontal possibilities of our shared world. This renders my perception of Frida on Skype of a different sort to image-consciousness as Husserl characterises it.

How, then, should we think about the experience of perceiving someone over video link? I think that Husserl's own work contains a potential pointer here. As noted, Husserl states that when we perceive images, we are not fooled into thinking that they are real. Yet, he does acknowledge that certain technologies do deceive us:

Deception and sensory illusion of the sort belonging to *panorama images, cinematographic images, and the like*, depend on the fact that the appearing objects in their whole appearing state *are slightly or imperceptibly different from the objects appearing in normal perception*. One can know in these cases that they are mere image objects, *though one cannot vitally sense this*. (Husserl 2005, 146, my emphasis)

Sadly, Husserl does not provide a detailed analysis of cinematic perception. However, what I take him to be saying here is that when we see cinematic images that so perfectly resemble normal perception, that the structure of our experience here is not that of image-consciousness but is better spoken of as analogous to illusion or hallucination. This, I think, fits our experience of Frida over Skype; although I am seeing Frida in a *mediated* manner, I do experience her as really there (albeit that she is not in the same

physical room as me). This may be some kind of illusion but it has the same structure as ordinary perceptual experience. Note that this is not to say that there are no differences between technologically-mediated perception and ordinary perception. As I will explore in more detail below, certain sensory possibilities are denied to me on Skype, for instance, I cannot touch Frida. However, I think these differences, while interesting, do not warrant the claim that I only perceive an image of Frida.

Having defended the claim that I perceive Frida over Skype, the question now is whether we are justified in saying that this amounts to the kind of direct perceptual access that we require for empathy? As discussed, empathy is often described as a *direct* and *unmediated* experience of the other (e.g. Stein 1989, 24; Zahavi 2014, 167). Here, although I am turned towards Frida's lived body and not to the screen, her lived body is technologically-mediated. Does this mean that we are prevented from saying that I empathetically perceive Frida's happiness over Skype? I argue not. When we talk about directly perceiving someone's lived body in the context of empathy, what is direct is my experience of *their* experience. 'Direct' is meant to pick out that we do not use indirect methods such as inference or simulation to grasp the other's experience. I perceive their experiences in a direct and immediate manner. Contra Fuchs, I still directly perceive Frida's bodily happiness in her smiles and laughter. I do not suddenly infer or simulate her happiness because her lived body happens to be technologically-mediated.

While empathy is always direct, in the sense of not being inferential, I argue that it need not always be unmediated, in the sense that the other's lived body is not given to me in an unmediated fashion. Online, then, we can have a direct but mediated empathetic encounter of the other's lived body. Remember, moreover, that according to empathy theorists we only use tools such as inference or simulation when we have already empathetically experienced the other as an embodied and expressive subject. In

order to start inferring or simulating Frida's experience, I must have first empathetically grasped that her smiles and gestures are expressive movements of an embodied subject.

This case-study, I think, establishes that there is at least one instance where it makes sense to speak about empathetically perceiving the other online. I now want to turn to a more controversial case of empathetically encountering the other online: texting in the form of instant messaging.

4.2. WhatsApp: text incorporated

I am messaging Diego on WhatsApp. We are using text interspersed with emojis to chat about his love life. WhatsApp also indicates when Diego is online ('online'), that he has read my messages (two blue ticks), when he is typing ('typing...'), and when he was last active ('last seen today at 11:03'). I cannot, however, either see or hear Diego's body or voice. Yet, I can 'hear' the excitement in his messages, the over-enthusiastic tone, his desire to talk about his new partner Carl. But does it make sense to talk about my having an empathetic perception of Diego's happiness here?

On the face of it, this seems like a starkly different case to skyping with Frida. On Skype, Frida's expressive behaviour is empathetically available because I can *see* her face, *hear* her voice; her lived body is there on my screen. With Diego, what is on my screen are letters and basic pictures. How could this amount to having access to Diego's lived body? Although he does not specify, it is likely that it is these kinds of interactions that Fuchs has in mind when he talks about how online we encounter one another via pictures and symbols. According to Fuchs, we do not have access to Diego as an embodied subject. I want to challenge this. To do so we need to understand how words as speech, while not a part of our physical body, are incorporated into the field of expression of our lived body.

Merleau-Ponty famously claims that ‘speech accomplishes thought’ (2012, 183). In stating this, he distances himself from the idea that speech is merely the externalization of inner thought. He argues that we should not think of speech as a sign of thought, the way that smoke is a sign of fire. Rather, it is *through* speaking that we think and feel. For example, think of the occasions where we talk through our thoughts and feelings in order to work them out. This accounts for how ‘my words can surprise me and teach me my own thought’ (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 111); they are not signs of something ready-formed but are part of the thought itself.

Already we can see a resemblance between how Merleau-Ponty depicts speech and how we have discussed bodily expressivity as a constitutive part of experience. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty makes precisely this analogy when stating that speech itself is gesture (2012, 187). Not only is speech constitutive of thought but speech is itself embodied and expressive: ‘Speaking is (also) something a human organism does with her body, like dancing, gesturing, grimacing, screaming, singing, etc.’ (Colombetti 2009, 9). It is through *speaking* that we express our thoughts and feelings and through speaking that our experience is intersubjectively available:

For the speaker, then, speech does not translate a ready-made thought; rather, speech accomplishes thought. Even more so, it must be acknowledged that the person listening receives the thought from the speech itself. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 183)

Speech, as something embodied, is accessible to others; the *speaking* subject is always an *embodied* subject. As Husserl notes: ‘the hearer perceives the speaker as manifesting certain inner experiences, and to that extent he also perceives these experiences themselves’ (1970, 278). Speech, then, forms part of the field of expression of our lived body that can be empathetically perceived. As a listener, I perceive your experience

through your speech. Thus, when I *hear* your anger, I not only hear the tone, I also hear your anger through your words. I do not need to infer what your words mean; I do not need to endow them with sense. I directly hear your words saturated with your experience, with your meaning. I am not directed to your words as objects, as a script, but at what you are expressing. I hear what you are expressing because I am attending to your subjective, lived, expressive body not to a physical body emitting noises.

Words do not form part of our lived body simply by virtue of being part of our physical body.⁹ However, as discussed in section 2, tools can be incorporated into our lived body when they are used in a way that they become transparent, come to shape and mould our experiences. The blind man's cane is incorporated into his lived body as it extends his field of perception, experiences the cane not as a separable object but part of his being in the world. Moreover, incorporated objects can be perceived by others as part of the expressive field of someone's lived body. Language and words are also 'part of our equipment' (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 185) which we incorporate into our lived body. Just as the blind man's experience extends to the tip of the cane, so I experience my words as *part* of my experience not a mere container for it. Indeed, language is so deeply incorporated into our subjective experience that we literally struggle to think of what it would be like to be without it.

How, though, does this help us in relation to texting? Texting involves written words, not spoken ones.¹⁰ Diego's texting also accomplishes his thoughts and feelings,

⁹ Note that simply being part of the physical body is not sufficient for something to be part of our expressive, lived body. My liver, for example, is part of my physical body but does not form part of the field of expression of my lived body.

¹⁰ Note that I will not deal with all forms of writing here, though this obviously opens up questions not only about empathy in other cases of writing such as letters or emails. I think, however, there are interesting divergences across these forms of writing that affect

he discovers his own feelings for Carl as he tells me about him, realises his own excitement in his fast-paced messaging. Texting, like speaking, can be a constitutive part of his experience, is incorporated into his lived, expressive body. What is more, his texts are perceptually available to others.

Just as when I listen to someone speaking, when I am reading Diego's messages, I am not (usually) directed at the words but at what Diego is saying to me. What is special about texting is that we typically text in a style that is very close to face-to-face conversational style. We take turns, use informal language, engage in synchronous and reciprocal interactions (Ben-Ze'ev 2004; Baym 2015; Garde-Hansen and Gorton 2013). Moreover, 'text-based media afford many ways to express emotion. We use emoticons to signal friendliness, we use punctuation and capitalization to insert feeling, we use informal language and talk-like phonetics spellings to create an air of conversationality' (Baym 2015, 13). I experience Diego's *voice* given to me in his effusive words, his excited tone, the rapid style of responding, and so on. While I do not see his excitement play across his face in smiles, I experience it in his texting.

The pace of Diego's messages, the patter of his speech, his choice of words, his use of emojis and wild punctuation all form part of the field of expression I directly perceive. The style of his texting has a certain 'vitality' (Stern 2010) to it that is not contained *in* the texts but unfolds through the texting itself, giving his messages a certain expressive tone. Like the hearer, I, as a reader, perceive Diego's excitement through his texting, which forms part of his lived, expressive body. As Kekki puts it:

whether we can empathetically grasp the writer (e.g. time, reciprocity between writer and reader, the dynamics of the interaction). I restrict myself here to texting, which, in many ways, most closely resembles spoken, face-to-face communication as it often unfolds in the present in a dynamic and interactive manner, in informal language.

‘the words we read or listen to become ‘lived’ for us...[and] we perceive the words as expressions of their producers’ (2020, 8). Contra Fuchs, Diego’s texts are full of emotional cues and expressive gestures which I perceive as his messages unfold on my screen. This motivates the claim that not only do we empathetically perceive the *speaking* subject but also the *texting* subject.

To reduce Diego’s messages to disembodied signs and symbols misses the way we experience speech (either spoken or texted) as expressive. Indeed, that we do experience Diego’s messages as expressive at all should itself prompt us to understand that empathy is at play here. Again, recall that empathy theorists argue that empathy is the fundamental form of other-understanding, for unless we recognise someone as a subject, recognise their behaviour as expressive, we would not know to whom to project experience onto. If Fuchs is right that we project emotions onto the text of the other online, we must have first empathetically experienced their words *as* expressive in the first place. In Husserl’s words: ‘the possibility of sociality, the possibility of comprehension, presupposes a certain lived-bodily intersubjectivity’ (Husserl 1970, 297) and this applies just as much to the online world as the offline one. Consequently, even in cases of texting, I argue that we empathetically perceive the other.

5. Exploring the limits

While I have argued that we empathetically perceive others online, there *are* differences between online encounters and face-to-face ones. The reduced perceptual richness of these interactions, as well as their temporal structure, may be grounds for challenging my claim that empathy occurs online. I consider these challenges below and argue that while these considerations help us explore the limit cases for empathy, they do not undermine online empathy *per se*.

5.1. Perceptual richness

One might be concerned that when we go online and encounter the other's lived body in a technologically-mediated manner, the perceptual richness of the face-to-face interaction is lost, thus impacting one's ability to empathetically perceive the other online. A badly connected Skype call renders the image of the other pixelated and blurry. Even when the connection is good, it does not have the same perceptual clarity as a face-to-face interaction. Also, while we have visual and auditory access to the other over Skype, we cannot apprehend them with all our sensorial capacities; for example, I cannot (yet) touch Frida through the screen. Our perceptual grasp of Diego is even less rich, as we are limited to perceiving him via text. There might be a certain amount of perceptual richness that is needed for empathy. Perhaps this threshold is not met in online encounters. Note that strictly speaking neither of these concerns rule out the idea of online empathy. If we lived in a world where our perceptual access to the other over Skype was as perceptually rich and multi-sensorial as face-to-face, this would allow for online empathy. Nevertheless, these concerns might suggest that online empathy is not currently possible.

While we cannot grasp people using our full suite of sensorial capacities over Skype or WhatsApp, this full suite is not necessary for empathy. I can hear someone's anger in their voice if I am blind or see their anger if I am deaf. To empathetically perceive someone does not require that I perceive them with all my sensory capacities. Indeed, such a position would have worryingly ableist implications. This challenge does not, therefore, find its mark as we should not apply a higher standard of perceptual richness for online cases compared to offline ones.

What about the claim that the quality of the other's technologically-mediated body may not be sufficient for empathy? For me to see your happiness in your smile, I

must be able to see your expressivity with sufficient detail. While this is doubtless the case, again we must be careful not to apply a standard to online encounters above offline ones. Point-light display experiments suggest that even with minimal perceptual input, we perceive certain actions, emotions, intentions of others (e.g. Pavelova et al. 2001; Runeson 1985). Such experiments indicate that we can empathetically perceive another's experiences even when our perceptual access is pretty sparse.

It seems unlikely that we will be able to provide an exact cut-off for when someone's lived body is no longer available to me with enough perceptual richness for empathy. Factors such as how well I know someone, what the empathized person is doing, and so on, are likely to all play a role in this. Intense anger might be perceived with relatively low perceptual richness, while pity might require greater perceptual richness. I might be able to detect my partner's disgruntlement just by catching a glance of them out of the corner of my eye in a way I could not do with a stranger.

It is helpful to think of the required perceptual richness as being on a spectrum; where, typically, as I experience someone with less perceptual richness, the less likely I am to empathetically perceive them. There might be a transition when the quality of the Skype call is so blurry that I can no longer empathetically perceive Frida. Perhaps at this point I perceive the pixelated screen and not Frida's lived, expressive body. As we move down the scale of perceptual richness, it also seems likely that I am going to be more prone to 'getting it wrong'; where the screen is blurry I seem more likely to mistake Frida's grimace for a smile.

One last thing should be said here. I have implied that more perceptual richness is always better for empathy. There are a number of reasons to question this. One such reason is that what counts as perceptual richness is not particularly clear. If perceptual richness just means 'more', in some cases, it may well inhibit our empathetic

capabilities. If you are shouting in my ear, any subtlety of tone is likely lost, thus impeding my empathetic perception of you. Likewise, getting extremely close to your mouth is not going to give me a better empathetic grip of your smile. People, like paintings, might have an optimal distance from which they are viewed. Using Merleau-Ponty's (2012) terminology, it seems possible that there is an 'optimal grip' that we can get of people that is not just a question of as much perceptual intensity as possible. Furthermore, what someone's optimal grip of another is, is going to be different for different people. This can be brought out, in particular, when we consider individuals who find a lot of perceptual stimulus distracting or overwhelming (e.g. individuals with autism). For some people, perceptual access to someone's lived, expressive body that is not *too* perceptually rich may well aid empathy, rather than inhibit it. For some, it might actually be *easier* to empathetically perceive others online than offline.

5.2. Temporality

On Skype, the connection can stutter and glitch. Frida's face can freeze, waiting for the connection to re-establish and for her to be given to me in live time once again. Over WhatsApp, there are delays in the messages sent, received and read by me and Diego, from seconds, to minutes, to hours. In classic phenomenological discussions, empathy is characterized as my *present* experience of someone else's *present* experience (e.g. Stein 1989, 2). Could time-lag jeopardize my empathetic experience of Frida and Diego as I am not perceiving them with the same immediacy as face-to-face?

Technically, I never perceive anyone's expressive lived body instantaneously; there is always a time-lag between someone smiling and the time it takes for the light to reach me, allowing me to perceive their smile. Nevertheless, in our Skype and WhatsApp examples, the time-lag is more significant than this. Could a temporal delay

prevent or disrupt empathy because we are not perceiving someone's *present* experience?

Discussions of online encounters put pressure on the idea that empathy is directed at the other's present experience. We are forced to ask the rather odd-sounding question of 'how long is the present?'. Face-to-face, we allow that I perceive your present experience despite the micro-delay in light and sound waves reaching me. Can this micro-delay be stretched somewhat while still allowing us to experience the other's present experience? When I ask Frida how her day was and her reply reaches me with a slight delay created through the technological-mediation, my empathetic perception of her lived body is slightly out-of-sync with her embodied experience of happiness. I still perceive her bodily enthusiasm and it seems that I still experience her enthusiasm as her *present* enthusiasm. How far, though, can we push this temporal delay? What about Diego's texts, which I might read minutes or hours after he sent them? What if Frida sent me a video-recording of her chatting that I viewed the next day?

We are faced with three possible routes with respect to this challenge. One: we accept that where we find temporal delay that is longer online than face-to-face, this does not count as empathy, as we are no longer experiencing the other's *present* experience. Such time-lag occurs on Skype where the connection is not fast enough and likely threatens all text-based communication. However, in adopting this position, one would need to defend why face-to-face interaction sets the limit on what counts as the 'present' in a non-arbitrary way. It also needs to account for why it *seems* like I am directly perceiving Frida and Diego's happiness online, despite their happiness potentially being in the past. Two: we do away with the idea that we can only empathise with someone's present experiences. This would allow us to say that if I watched a video-recording of Frida, I still empathetically grasp her happiness in her smile, even

though it is her past happiness. This leaves us facing questions about whether it makes sense to talk about directly seeing a constitutive part of someone's experience, where the rest of their experience has been-and-gone. Three: we phenomenologically investigate what we mean by 'present experience' in more detail. Note that routes two and three are not mutually exclusive.

I cannot provide an answer to this here. However, I want to raise two points in favour of pursuing route three. First, experience is not static. Experience does not happen in freeze-frames but temporally unfolds. Happiness does not happen in a snapshot moment but is temporally extended. The window for my empathetically perceiving someone's *present* happiness may, then, be longer than we first suppose. Second, our experience of sharing an interpersonal-temporal-present with others may be shaped by our normative expectations. In conversations between neurotypical individuals, response times are usually quite fast. Individuals with autism typically respond with a longer-than-average time-delay (Leary and Donnellan 2012). This can lead to neurotypical individuals experiencing conversations with those with autism as stilted, as not unfolding smoothly in the present moment. Yet, neurotypical individuals can adjust their expectations and no longer experience the time-delay as awkward or disruptive (Krueger 2019). I suggest that one way to interpret this is that a time-delay is no longer experienced because the neurotypical's experience of what falls within their shared temporal-present is extended based upon modulated expectations of response times. Our perceptual experience of what is *present* might, then, be shaped by our expectations. When engaging in online communication we might also have altered expectations of what constitutes the present moment. If this is the case, even though I read Diego's messages minutes after they were sent, I might perceive his experience as being part of our shared temporal-present. These considerations, I think, motivate a more extensive

phenomenological analysis of how we experience the temporal-present online and at least staves off the challenge that empathy cannot occur online until such research is done.

Conclusion

This paper started with the question of *how* we can encounter others online when we are not face-to-face. I have shown that concepts found at the heart of the phenomenological tradition can be applied to the online sphere to answer this question. I have clarified that as empathy involves perceiving the other's expressive lived body, and the lived body is not tied to our physical body, we can empathetically encounter others outside of face-to-face interactions. Having decoupled empathy from face-to-face interactions, I rebuffed the idea that we engage in disembodied communication online by drawing on the phenomenological distinction between the objective and the lived body. Although the objective body cannot enter online space, I have presented two ways in which the other's lived body enters online space and can be empathetically perceived: first, in cases where our face-to-face encounter is technologically-mediated over video link and, second, by showing how the other's texts, as speech, can be part of the other's lived body.

By establishing that empathy takes place online, we can defend the idea that we really do encounter one another online, and not merely imagined others. Moreover, through phenomenological analysis of online encounters, we enrich our concept of empathy by feeling out its limit cases. In online interactions, issues such as perceptual richness and the temporal structure of other-experience, that have passed under the radar in face-to-face interactions, come to the fore. This is, though, not to say that we experience others online in exactly the same way as we do face-to-face. There might be

multiple other factors at play that make the face-to-face encounter special in some way. Indeed, if we think about empathy as something that happens on a spectrum, where I can have a better or worse empathetic grasp of the other – perhaps with simply recognising someone as an embodied subject on one end of the spectrum and empathetically perceiving a close friend and grasping a range of subtle emotions and experiences through their personal style of gestures, tics, expressions, and vitality enriched by my intimate knowledge of them at the other end – it should be noted that I have not suggested that this full empathetic range is available online. I am making the more restrained claim that at least some level of empathy is available in certain interpersonal encounters online. Having made this initial move, we are now in a position to pursue further considerations about the differences and similarities of empathetic encounters online and offline.

As emphasised above, the online realm is not a homogenous space and contains many different styles of interpersonal interaction. I have, however, claimed that our foundational form of other experience, empathy, takes place in certain online settings. This opens the door for a plethora of other online interpersonal experiences that presuppose empathy; e.g., inference, simulation, projection, sympathy or shared experiences.¹¹ Phenomenology, with its extensive research on intersubjectivity and sociality, along with its sophisticated analyses of embodiment, temporality, and spatiality, has much to add to our philosophical considerations of online experiences.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Joel Krueger and Tom Roberts for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper and for the many conversations they have endured

¹¹ See Kekki (2020) for a discussion of online learning and Osler (2019) for an exploration of how we can have shared experiences and a sense of togetherness with others online.

about Skype, WhatsApp, images and perception. I would also like to thank the blind reviewer who took the time to review my paper and provided extremely thoughtful feedback.

Funding details: This work was supported by the AHRC South, West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership under Grant Number AH/L503939/1.

Disclosure of interest: The author reports no conflict of interest.

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