

# *Empathy for the Depicted*

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ABSTRACT. Recently, a number of philosophers and neuroscientists have begun to explore the idea we may experience empathy for pictures. In this paper I explore the variety of ways in which we respond empathetically towards pictures. Empathy in response to pictures can refer either to the idea that the viewer empathizes with the depicted character's emotional state, or that the viewer empathizes with depicted scenes, in the sense of responding towards a depicted scene's expressed emotions. Regarding the latter, I question the idea that we can have a full-blown empathetic response to a scene that does not involve attributing emotions to a person, either depicted or hypothetical. I then explore responses to depicted characters, starting from a distinction between low-level motoric responses to pictures that afford an understanding of the viewer's bodily involvement in attending pictures, and emotional or empathetic responses. It is argued that neural and embodied simulation processes prompt passive and immediate responses to depicted characters, that are not though empathetic. These responses may give rise to automatic, immediate and conscious responses that provide a minimal access to the depicted character's perspective. Lastly, two main accounts of imaginative reconstruction or perspective shifting that have been proposed are examined as possible types of engagement with a depicted character.

## **1. Introduction**

It is a platitude that pictures often evoke powerful emotional reactions. Recently, a number of philosophers (Currie 2011; Lopes 2011; Carroll 2017; Matravers 2017; Robinson forth.) and neuroscientists (Freedberg & Gallese 2007) have begun to explore the idea that some of these emotional

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responses to pictures may further be empathetic. The question I explore in this paper is whether we respond empathetically to pictures and, if so, in what ways.

In everyday talk we refer to empathetic responses to pictures somewhat fast and loose. We may say that seeing Goya's *Third of May, 1808* evokes empathy, as the feeling of utmost injustice for the execution wells up on us; that the photo of the three-year-old Aylan's lifeless body washed ashore mobilized empathy; that through empathy we place ourselves in the depicted people's place and come to have an understanding of the depicted characters, of their thoughts, feelings, attitudes or character traits<sup>2</sup>. This everyday concept of empathy takes in appropriate emotional responses to the depicted character's course of life, such as feeling sad for the man being executed in Goya's painting or feeling devastated in seeing Aylan's photo, and a sense of *caring for* or *siding with* the depicted characters.

## **2. From Sympathy to *Einfühlung* in Aesthetics**

The ambiguity in the use of 'empathy' in relation to experiences of pictures is anticipated since it has proven notoriously difficult to reach a consensus

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<sup>2</sup> The arguments here presented are supposed to apply as much to certain types of pictures that represent situations or people existing in time - such as photographs or historic paintings or portraits- as well as to pictures that represent fictional entities or situations. There are three interrelated issues that they have not been adequately addressed from current philosophical or psychological research about empathy: (i) whether and in what way the artistic nature of a picture affects the way spectators emotionally or empathetically respond. Research does not provide extensive and clear evidence; for example, Van Dongen et al (2016) suggest that there is implicit emotion regulation in art context, see also Mocaiber et al (2010); however, Gerger et al (2014) argue that the artistic nature of a picture has little influence on negative emotional reactions such as anger, fear, disgust, shame etc. Another closely related issue is (ii) whether and in what way the category of the objects represented (individuals that exist; fictional characters that could have existed in the actual world, such as Anna Karenina, a woman coming to suicide because of her failed affair; or characters that do not exist and could not have existed in the actual world, such as the Satyr Marsyas) affects the empathic response towards them. In a recent study Sperduti et al (2016) provide evidence that fiction-generated emotions are physically robust, as indicated by physiological arousal comparable to responses to real material, but the subjective intensity and valence rating of emotional responses to fiction-material are rather weaker, except in the cases where stimuli elicit personal memories (for analogous results, see Goldstein 2009).

on the notion of empathy, a concept employed in almost so many ways as the philosophers dealing with it<sup>3</sup>. One issue is whether empathy involves a *feeling towards* another person's misfortune or joy; in other words, if the *process* of empathizing with another person involves or entails sympathizing with that person by *feeling sad or happy for her state* because one believes that something bad or good respectively has happened to her<sup>4</sup>. Perhaps we begin to impose some order in this turmoil if empathy is distinguished from sympathy and the tendency to run them together is avoided (Goldie 2000, 176-177)<sup>5</sup>.

Historically, 'empathy' was introduced in the early 20th century as the translation of the German concept *Einfühlung* (literally, feeling into)<sup>6</sup>; it is in some way surprising to the modern reader that it firstly appeared in works in aesthetics and psychology to explain the experience of aesthetic (inanimate) objects (Vischer 1873)<sup>7</sup>. Theodor Lipps (1903; 1906) took the concept *Einfühlung* to describe the aesthetic perception of an object by means of projection of the self into it; subsequently Lipps expanded the concept to include the experiencing of other people's mental states as well<sup>8</sup>. Up to that time, the term "sympathy" was used extensively to denote the act

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Batson (2009) differentiates eight uses of the term empathy; see also Wispe (1986); Coplan & Goldie (2011) and Stueber (2013); also Zahavi (2010), for a similar comment see Carroll (2011).

<sup>4</sup> For this account of sympathy see Goldie (2000), 180; also Maibom (2012).

<sup>5</sup> Despite the efforts made to differentiate between empathy and sympathy there is not yet widespread consensus on that. On the differences between these concepts see Batson (2009), Wispe (1986); on the history of the concepts see Jahoda (2005), Debes (2015), Matravers (2017).

<sup>6</sup> The term *Einfühlung* was translated as 'empathy' by E. B. Titchener in his *A Text Book of Psychology*.

<sup>7</sup> Harry Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikononou trace the more technical introduction of 'Einfühlung' in Aesthetics by Robert Vischer in his dissertation "On the Optical Sense of Form: A contribution to Aesthetics" (1873). As Mallgrave and Ikononou (1994, 23) explain, according to Vischer's hypothesis of projection, in responding aesthetically to an object there is an 'empathetic feeling or empathy with the form of the object...[and] in this mode of viewing things, our mental-sensory ego [...] is projected inside the object'.

<sup>8</sup> As many commentators notice, the concept of *Einfühlung* in Lipps and other Empathists of the early 20th century is obscure and unclear (Matravers 2017; Currie 2011). Vernon Lee (1856-1935) and Wilhem Worringer (1881-1965) developed their own accounts of *Einfühlung*, which are differentiated from Lipps' in important ways, even though they are closely related to it, see Rader (1979).

of perceiving, understanding or imagining the other's perspective, with references to the work of the Scottish Enlightenment theorists David Hume and Adam Smith<sup>9</sup>. In the move from exploring *Einfühlung* as the aesthetic perception of an object to exploring it as applying to interpersonal relations, Lipps missed to differentiate between *Einfühlung* and sympathy; consequently, Edward Titchener translated *Einfühlung* as empathy, believing that he had to coin a completely distinct concept (Jahoda 2005).

In contemporary literature, most theorists distinguish between sympathy and empathy, though not always consistently. In general, the idea is that one's own perspective and emotional state may match the other's perspective or emotional state without necessarily one's own emotion been directed at the other's welfare (Goldie 2002; Maibom 2014; also Prinz 2011); for example, Noel Carroll often discusses the possibility of the "sadistic empath" or torturer who uses her perception of the victim's pain to torture the victim effectively, a point also made by Max Scheler (Carroll 2011; 2017)<sup>10</sup>. And reversely, one can feel sad or happy for another without one's sympathetic concern to co-occur or result from one's feeling the suffering or joy of the other person<sup>11</sup>.

So, for example, we feel sad for the seriously ill woman in seeing Hodler's *Valentine Godé-Darel in Her Bed With Folded Hands* (1914); our emotional response is sympathetic since we understand that she is suffering or how disease has affected her life, we attend to her feelings but we do not necessarily feel what she feels; the feelings are our own (see Debes 2015). Or in seeing the 19th century painting *The Princes in the Tower* we may feel fear as the little princes unknowingly await for their execution while of course the princes themselves do not feel fear or an emotion of 'recognizably the same type' (Matravers 2017) as the one we feel; thus I

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<sup>9</sup> Especially Smith's account of sympathy in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is important for the contemporary discussions on empathy. See for example Smith (1759/1976, 1-2). For both Hume's and Smith's concept of sympathy and their relation to the contemporary concept of empathy, see Coplan & Goldie (2011a, x-xi).

<sup>10</sup> See Scheler (1970, 8-9, 14).

<sup>11</sup> Although I think this is more contested, in that it could be argued that responding appropriately to the other's emotional experience does, even to some degree, involve experiencing the other's emotional state.

think our response should be described as being emotionally appropriate or sympathetic to the depicted other's perspective rather than empathetic<sup>12</sup>.

### 3. Empathy for Pictures

The transition from sympathy to *Einfühlung* and then to empathy is associated with the multiple ways in which the empathetic aspects of pictures have been explored. On the one hand, Lipps' formulation of *Einfühlung* as the rather awkward idea that the viewer is absorbed in the contemplation of a work of art by being "inwardly released from [one's own] ego" and transported through "a spatial extension of the ego" into the work of art (Lipps)<sup>13</sup>, can nevertheless be useful in understanding a viewer's *bodily involvement* in attending pictures aesthetically. Currie (2011) follows the Empathists' path and explores motoric responses to many artworks; that is, he discusses the involvement of simulative processes in our engagement with both the aesthetic properties of artworks and ordinary objects as well as in our recognition of the other people's emotional state.

On the other hand, the concept of empathy is important in understanding a viewer's *emotional involvement* in attending pictures. This latter way of discussing about empathic responses towards fiction and representational art is the most common. Things muddle because we seem to think of empathic responses as involving something more than an understanding of the other's thoughts, feelings and perspective. Thus, many differentiate between cognitive empathy or mindreading and affective empathy. Martin Hoffman (2000) defines cognitive empathy as the awareness of another's feelings, and affective empathy as feeling what

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<sup>12</sup> The paradigm is mentioned in Coplan and Goldie (2011, xliii), however they seem to accept that 'sometimes we empathize with a target where that target does not himself feel the emotion'. I think that this statement is problematic in that it obscures what Coplan and Goldie themselves tried to clarify, namely the distinction between sympathy and empathy. Responding appropriately to the other's emotional state is not equivalent to attaining the same type of emotions with the other person as a result of perceiving or imaginatively engaging with the other's experience (Goldie 2000; Matravers 2011; Prinz 2011).

<sup>13</sup> On the relation of Lipps' ideas to contemporary research see Zahavi (2010).

another feels. Heidi Maibom refers to cognitive empathy as ‘the ability to ascribe mental states to others, such as beliefs, intentions, or emotions’ and to affective empathy as essentially involving affect on the part of the empathizer (Maibom 2017, 1; see also Spaulding 2017).

For some, empathy proper is only affective empathy that requires a degree of identification or affective matching between the empathizer and the subject (Coplan 2004; Gaut 1999; Goldie 2000). Given that emotions ‘vary [...] in a number of dimensions - transparency, intensity, behavioural expression, object-directedness, and susceptibility to rational assessment’ (de Sousa 2014, 6), the degree of identification or affective matching required depends on what having the same type of emotion is taken to mean. Others allow for a wider concept of empathy that includes convergent emotional states between the empathizer and the subject (Carroll 2012) or for a concept of empathy that is not restricted to affective experiences and includes all mental phenomena (Zahavi 2014, Gallagher 2012).

What would then mean to say that we respond empathetically to a picture? An intriguing idea is that by seeing a picture I not only understand and come to know that the depicted character feels thus and so, but I somehow have a kind of “lively bodily experience” of the depicted character’s emotions that gives me a form of knowledge of (being) that character<sup>14</sup>. This rough conception of empathy as the ability to gain a kind of emotionally or affectively enhanced access to the depicted other’s experience will do as a starting point from which we can explore different types and processes by which pictures engage the viewer in empathetic manners.

Up to now, the talk about empathetic responses to pictures mainly refers to the idea that the viewer empathizes with the depicted character’s emotional state; to put it in a more cautious way, the viewer empathizes with “what the characters can be imagined to feel” (Carroll 2017, 287), or empathizes with the emotional state the depicted characters are represented

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<sup>14</sup> This idea of lively bodily experiences is found in Adam Smith’s discussion of compassion. According to Smith, “Of this kind is compassion or pity, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner.” (Smith 1759/1976, 9).

as having. Empathizing, in this case, may mean that the viewer grasps what the depicted characters are thinking or feeling or that the viewer simply understands what they experience from their own perspective. It may also mean that in seeing the picture the viewer perceives what it is like for the depicted character to be in a certain emotional state and thus the viewer comes to share it.

It is also argued that we empathize with depicted scenes, in the sense that we empathetically respond towards a depicted scene's expressed emotions<sup>15</sup>. Dominic Lopes (2011) has recently tried to account for what he calls the distinctively pictorial manner in which pictures contribute to empathic skill. According to Lopes, one way in which our empathetic responses to pictures differ from our empathetic responses to subjects physically present is that seeing pictures may involve seeing the scene as expressing an emotion that is nevertheless not attributable to the depicted figures.

I think that we often attribute emotional qualities to scenes<sup>16</sup>; for example, Salman Rushdie's Harun lives in "a sad city [...] a city so ruinously sad that it had forgotten its name. It stood by a mournful sea full of glumfish" (Rushdie 2014). It may then be the case that sometimes, in Stephen Davies words, we "catch the emotional ambience of our environment" (Davies 2011, 137). We describe a depicted pastoral landscape as expressing melancholy or sadness or we may see a scene as expressing pain or trauma. In cases as these, the viewer does not have a full-blown emotional response; rather, one "picks-up" or mirrors an indeterminate feeling or mood that is not necessarily directed towards the scene; also, one may not be consciously aware that one's own response is related *in a specific way* to the depicted scene. Psychological research may offer a lot in explaining this kind of low-level resonating responses, such as

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<sup>15</sup> For a brief discussion of the matter and rejection of the idea that we may respond empathetically either towards scenes or towards a painting as such see Carroll 2017.

<sup>16</sup> In my view we do ascribe emotional properties both to real scenes and to scenes depicted or fictive. Thus, I disagree with Lopes's claim that the fact that pictures 'guide' us to the emotion by scene expression 'has no parallel in non-pictorial experience, which does not represent bits of inanimate nature as expressing emotions.' (Lopes 2011, 130).

for example studies on the association of colors and mood<sup>17</sup>. My suggestion is, thus, that one type of response towards depictions of scenes, landscapes, or non-sentient objects may appear as “picking-up” or contagion.

Another plausible idea is to consider the scene as expressing the emotions of the artist; however, the fact that we also attribute emotions to physical scenes probably shows that this is not necessarily the case (see Carroll 1999, 84-85). For example, we have no reason to believe that while Béla Bartók composed *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* - a piece expressing fear and uneasiness- he must have experienced fear himself. Even if we learn that Bartók was in a state of constant joy, we would still take the piece to express fear (see for a similar point Carroll 1999; Goldman 1995, Davies 2009). We should however allow that in some cases responding empathically towards depictions of scenes, landscapes, or non-sentient objects is the result of imagining feeling, cognizing or perceiving what the artist felt during the creation of the artwork. For example, knowing that Van Gogh suffered from mental illness can make the viewer experience sadness and sorrow that is directed towards the mentally ill Van Gogh, while observing one of the works that Van Gogh painted during his hospitalization (see also Goldman 1995).

It can also be the case that the viewer responds with empathy towards an unrepresented hypothetical persona in the depiction (see Levinson 1996; Robinson 1994). In other words, sometimes the viewer empathizes with the emotions that the scene would arouse to a fictional character or to the viewer, if she/he were at this scene.

To sum up, I find it difficult to espouse the idea that I can have a full-blown empathetic response to a scene that would not involve attributing emotions to a person, either depicted or imagined. For from a phenomenological point of view, how could free-floating emotions, that are not attributed to a person or a hypothetical persona produce our response? As Zahavi rightly points out “one cannot empathize with unowned

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<sup>17</sup> For example in M. Hemphill’s experimental study (1996) the subjects associated bright colors with the elicitation of positive emotional associations, and dark colors with mainly negative emotional associations.



experiences. The empathized experiences are given as belonging to another; they are given as lived through first-personally by that other” (2015, p.151).

#### **4. Empathy for the Depicted**

Even if in ordinary language we use the concept of empathy in relation to paintings, photographs, drawings, prints, is there any evidence that empathy does occur in our engagement with pictures? Evidence from neuropsychological research show that there is. Sometimes seeing a picture involves an immediate passive response to a depicted face. Studies accounting for emotion sharing using measures of facial electromyography (EMG) indicate that when participants were exposed to pictures of happy or angry facial expressions facial mimicry was observed (Sonnyby-Borgstrom, Jonson, & Svenson 2003; see Decety & Meltzoff 2011 for a review)<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, research using functional neuroimaging studies have shown that there are striking similarities in the neural mechanisms engaged both in the first-personal experience of pain and in the observation of other people’s pain while presented with short animated visual stimuli depicting painful and non-painful bodily situations (Decety, Michalska & Akitsuki 2008). Although these and other relevant studies were conducted to study the role of the basic somatic sensorimotor resonance in the primitive building block of empathy and moral reasoning, researchers actually used pictorial depictions as objects purporting to trigger affective sharing (e.g Lamm et al. 2007; Gu & Han 2007); so, I think, it is safe to conclude that these studies provide evidence for the mechanisms and processes underlying the generation of empathic responses to pictures. In other words, the same kind of emotional mechanism is employed for both real-life emotional responses and pictorial-directed emotional responses.

Exploring ways of responding empathetically to pictures thus starts from the neural and embodied simulation processes that prompt passive and immediate responses to depicted characters.

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<sup>18</sup> The tendency to imitate facial and other behaviour is already found in newborns (see Field et al 1982; Meltzoff & Moore, 1977) and adults, the latter exposed to pictures of happy or angry facial expressions (Dimberg & Thunberg 2012).

#### ***4.1 Neural and Embodied Simulation Processes: Passive, Immediate Responses to Depicted Characters.***

Pictures depicting faces are not the only one evoking physiological or bodily responses; it has been argued that pictures of painful situations that do not however depict the face of someone in pain, such as a depiction of a hand getting injected, or pictures depicting a part of someone's body getting touched or caressed, activate the cortical network of areas that are normally involved in the experience of pain or of being touched. Interestingly enough, Freedberg and Gallese argue that a type of embodied simulation also occurs in cases such as Pollock's paintings or to the cut canvases of Lucio Fontana, where the viewer simulates the "implied gestures of the artist"; that is, the viewer may experience "a sense of bodily involvement with the movements that are implied by the physical traces – in brushmarks or paint drippings – of the creative actions of the producer of the work" (Freedberg & Gallese 2007, p.198)<sup>19</sup>. However, this is a rather different case, since these low-level responses should probably be considered as responses towards the artist's actions during the creation of the artwork rather than as responses towards what is depicted in the painting.

In the cases described above, neural processes bring about passive (involuntary) immediate (non-inferential) responses to the depicted character's emotional state and perspective. In some cases, these reflexive changes can only be detectable third personally from observation of the viewers overt behaviour or facial and bodily reactions or from the detection of the activation of analogous motor representations in the viewer at the sub-personal level. So, one type of engagement with a picture evolves as a low-level or mirroring process, leading to a "picking-up" of the depicted character's perspective or of the expressed emotions<sup>20</sup>. Responses of

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<sup>19</sup> See also Freedberg (1989), Sbriscia-Fioretti et al (2013).

<sup>20</sup> Simulation theorists have come to propose accounts of empathy involving various subconscious forms of direct responsiveness to the mental states of others, such as a 'primitive, 'low-level mind-reading' (Goldman 2006, 113) or 'basic empathy' (Steuber 2006) or even phenomena such as resonance, contagion and mimicry (see Coplan & Goldie 2011 for a review). Alvin Goldman opts for a model of "unmediated resonance" (Goldman & Sripada 2005; Goldman 2006), according to which an automatic, low-level empathic

“picking-up” type are unconscious reflex reactions, automatic simulations of facial expression, vocalizations, postures, and movements of the depicted figure.

However, not all cases of passive, immediate responses to pictures remain at the sub-personal level. In other cases, the observation of a pictorially represented emotion and the activation of analogous motor representation in the observer brings about an indeterminate feeling, such as a vague feeling of pleasure or easiness caused by the prints and photographs depicting nature art in health care settings; such feelings are not however directed at a specific object nor are directly related to the pictures.

Responses of the latter type do not involve full-fledged emotions, although they can initiate emotional responses; they lie close to and just above the threshold of consciousness and characterize a transition in consciousness. So one is aware of one’s own feeling, but one does not know why she experiences it in the sense that one’s emotion is not directed at the picture’s depicted content, nor are aspects of the picture the attentional focus of the viewer’s emotion. Even though this affective response to pictures is closely related to empathic responses, it is better described as a case of emotional contagion.

As Goldie (2000, 191-194) discusses contagion is an emotional response that does not involve awareness of what the other's emotion is about; it is a “catching” the other’s emotion without being aware that the emotion belongs primarily to the other. Hatfield et al (1992, 153-154) refer to this phenomenon as “primitive emotional contagion”, and define it as “the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures and movements with those of another person and, consequently, to converge emotionally”.

Thus, another condition for the viewer’s emotional response to be clearly characterized as empathic is that the viewer must also be aware of

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response results from the activation of the same neural substrate both when we experience an emotion ourselves and when we observe someone else experiencing the emotion. Research on mirror-neurons is impressive and expanding rapidly; indeed, the idea that we may be “genetically programmed” to empathically respond towards the others or ‘wired for empathy’ (Iacoboni 2008, 268) is appealing and promising new solutions to persist philosophical - up to now armchair - problems.

experiencing the emotion because of some aspect of the painting's content; it is not enough that the picture caused the viewer's emotion. In order to refer to a viewer's emotional response as empathetic, the viewer must be aware that it is not her own emotion that she is experiencing; rather, both the source and object of the particular emotion lie outside herself and beyond her own life situations (Decety and Jackson 2004; Vignemont & Singer 2006, Maibom 2017).

#### ***4.2 Basic Empathetic Response to Pictorial Artworks***

Let's take another example: we may think of some pictures depicting the view from a cliff from the point of view of someone looking down, where the viewer of the picture may get a feeling of fear of heights or of losing balance or falling, as if one is unwilling to look below. The response may be triggered both in the case that a person is depicted as standing on the edge of a cliff, and in the case of a scene depicted as seen from the perspective of someone standing on the edge but without that person depicted. In the former case, we probably respond emotionally towards an unrepresented hypothetical persona in the depiction (see Levinson 1996; Robinson 1994)<sup>21</sup>.

In these cases, besides the third-personally observable reflexive changes of the viewer, she herself is bodily aware of certain feelings caused by her seeing the painting. If, furthermore, the viewer is aware that what one is experiencing is a response to the depicted other's perspective and, therefore, one's own experience is anchored on the depicted other's experience and one maintains the self-other differentiation (one's attention is directed towards the depicted other), the response can be considered as empathetic.

Amy Coplan argues that only contagion is a direct, automatic and unmediated process, while empathy can never be fully unmediated since it

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<sup>21</sup> As a participant in the ESA Conference 2017 pointed, in some photographs appearing in the internet, people are depicted to smile excitedly while standing in the edge of a cliff. In such cases, the viewer's automatic and immediate response does not seem to match the depicted person's emotions. Projection prevails basic empathy, at least in the immediate response. A closer look at the photograph and the viewer's focusing on the depicted person's facial expression can alter the viewer's response.

requires perspective-taking (Coplan 2011, 9). In excluding emotional contagion and mimicry from the definition of empathy, Murray Smith also regards empathy as requiring a “higher-level type of volitional imagining” (Smith 2011, 103-104). However, as I argue, there is a type of emotional response to pictures that is non-volitional or automatic, immediate and conscious and provides a minimal access to the depicted character’s perspective<sup>22</sup>. It may and probably does comprise reflexive simulations of facial and bodily expressions, but at the phenomenological level it is not experienced as involving simulation<sup>23</sup>. I see no reason why we should refrain from referring to this type of responses towards the subject of a picture as basic empathetic responses to pictorial artworks.

Karsten Stueber, talks about basic empathy that “allows us to directly recognize what another person is doing or feeling” when observing her facial expressions or bodily behavior (Stueber 2006, 147). Goldman also argues that we have a low-level, automatic mechanism that produces an experience of basic emotions of the others such as fear or disgust that is

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<sup>22</sup> Carroll discusses both the aforementioned types of responses to pictures as cases of emotional contagion, admitting that he does not find it satisfying since he applies the term both to “mirror reflexes” or to the embodied simulation of features of the depicted figure and to (non full-fledged) emotions, such as catching a sense of wariness of the depicted figure (Carroll 2017). He seems to allow rather easily for mirror reflexes to affect the conscious level in that even though “they do not supply us with the kind of action-guiding, affective appraisals of the relevant targets of the states in questions as do emotions-in-full [...] [t]hey convey broad phenomenological insight into what our conspecifics are feeling qualitatively” (Carroll 2017; see also Carroll 2011, 178). But if the viewer is not aware of this “picking-up” of the depicted emotions through mirror reflexes, then the best we can say is that they have a non-conscious affect on emotional responses, as a kind of response priming; they do not impart information at the phenomenological level. To accept that they do, would amount to recognize them as reasons rather than as unspecific hints that do not necessarily involve awareness that it is the other’s emotional state that relates to one’s own bodily-feeling response. Moreover, Currie is right in pointing that “simulation mechanisms are too precariously related to the state of the other to count as ways of perceiving the other’s state” (Currie 2011, 89). Differentiating between mirror reflexes/picking-up and contagion allow us to explain why the latter can indeed provide phenomenological insight to the depicted character’s perspective and may also lead to an empathic response towards it.

<sup>23</sup> The basic idea supports a direct perception of emotions, drawing insights from the phenomenological theories of Zahavi and Gallagher and mostly from Goldie’s non-inferential perceptual account of emotional states; see also McDowell’s direct realism.

based on the perception of the other's facial expressions that activate a neural substrate of the same type of emotion in oneself (Goldman & Sripada, 2005; Shanton & Goldman 2010; Goldman 2006). Both Stueber and Goldman take basic empathy or low-level empathy as simulation based.

However, in what I regard as basic empathetic response, a person A has a basic empathic response to depicted character B if and only if A *directly perceives* B's expressed emotions while A is aware that A's own emotional response is about B's expressed emotions. Basic empathic response has as its outcome a state of acquaintance with the depicted character's expressed emotional state.

One may object that an empathic response should comprise sharing or partial sharing of the same type of emotion as the depicted character; that an empathic response amounts not just to perceiving the other's emotional state but also sharing it. But this objection would simply mean to miss the point of basic empathic response, for in directly perceiving the depicted figure's expressed emotion one instantiates the depicted character's emotion. As Zahavi states "empathic acquaintance doesn't presuppose or entail sharing in any straightforward sense of the term. [...] [Y]ou might empathically grasp your colleague's joy when he receives notice of his promotion even though you are personally chagrined by this piece of news. The fact that you don't share his joy, the fact that you are feeling a very different emotion, doesn't make it any less a case of empathy, doesn't make your awareness of his joy merely inferential or imaginative in character." (2014, 150).

What I suggest is that the viewer can sometimes connect with the depicted character in an affective way that is phenomenologically immediate<sup>24</sup>; however, what the viewer acquires from basic empathic response is usually limited, in that it does not provide rich information or full access to the other's emotional state, but the viewer is acquainted with the depicted character's basic emotional state, such as fear, anger, disgust, sadness, joy and surprise. Basic empathic response is not directly affected by knowledge about the depicted character acquired by the viewer. But the

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<sup>24</sup> The fact that this response is non-inferential, phenomenologically immediate does not mean that there cannot be sub-personal or non-conscious processing or mirroring underlying it; for a relevant comment Zahavi (2014, 162).

viewer can certainly develop his perceptual skill: some people are better than other in recognizing a depicted character's emotional state. Perceiving an artwork's or a depicted figure's expressed emotion is a skill that evolves over practice and engagement with art; and acquired knowledge can affect indirectly the development of this skill.

Basic empathic response provides a minimal access to the other's emotional state<sup>25</sup>; however, in our effort to have an emotionally or affectively enhanced access to the depicted character's perspective, we need to understand their situation and context (Carroll 2017). In fact, there are cases where empathizing with the other requires that we access what Goldie describes as long-term emotions, which are "typically complex, episodic, dynamic, and structured" (Goldie 2000, 12) and include bodily changes, perceptions, thoughts, feelings and dispositions (Faucher & Tappolet 2002, 110). We thus often turn to different types of engagement with the picture's depicted characters, employing more active simulation processes<sup>26</sup>. The idea is that we have an ability to use our imagination to reconstruct another person's thoughts, feelings and so forth, that enables to recreate, reenact or take-in the way the other is feeling or thinking (see Goldie 2000, Stueber 2006, Currie & Ravenscroft 2002)<sup>27</sup>. Two main accounts of imaginative reconstruction have been proposed, which are examined here as possible types of engagement with a depicted character.

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. de Vignemont (2010, 294): "Like for empathy, we will see that the deeper our understanding of others is, the less direct it is".

<sup>26</sup> These imaginative processes may be passively initiated; however the subject is actively directing his imagination so that he simulates the depicted other's emotional state. In a relative discussion, Goldie draws on Wollheim and points that an "unplanned" imaginative experience can be "especially vivid"; however, when one comes to reflectively focus on the imaginative process he's engaged, the "vividness" of his experience is diminished (Goldie 2000, 197). That one actively imaginatively reconstructs the depicted character's perspective does not mean that he is having an unconstrained experience, such as daydreaming. The process is constrained by one's effort to understand the other's perspective, thus the world-as-depicted, the context of the picture and one's own tacit knowledge about the world impose conditions on imaginative process; moreover, the subject is constrained by the conscious awareness that one is not imaginatively reconstructing one's own experience.

<sup>27</sup> I do not side with those equating empathy with simulation (either high level or below the personal level) (e.g., Gallese 2001, Goldman 2006, Stueber 2006, Coplan 2011).

### ***4.3 Moderate Perspective-Taking for Empathic Response to Pictures***

Person A empathizes with depicted character B if and only if A centrally imagines feeling, cognizing, or perceiving, what B feels, cognizes, or perceives, while A retains the awareness that B is the source of A's own affective state and primarily belongs to B. Moderate perspective-taking for empathic response to pictures involves projection.

In a less technical jargon, the viewer imagines what she herself would feel in the depicted figure's situation (or if she were physically present in the scene depicted) by imagining the events, actions, thoughts, feelings, and emotions - what Goldie refers to as the narrative structure of one's own life (Goldie 2000) - by embracing the other's perspective of the world. Thus, such imaginings involve conscious, experiential awareness of the state imagined. This process is referred to as "in his shoes perspective-shifting" (Goldie 2000), "self-oriented perspective-taking" (Coplan 2006)

"Centrally" is Goldie's term (drawing on Wollheim's distinction between central and acentral imagining) to explain this imaginative process as the "enactment of a narrative from [the] other person's point of view" (Goldie 1999, 397); that is, to stress that one is not imagining the other's narrative from an external point of view, but from the point of view of the depicted character. For example, I do not image *myself* swimming in the ocean as seen from a point of view high above the sea, I imagine swimming in the ocean from the point of view of the swimmer. I do not image seeing the expression of fear in my face, I do not see my face, instead I imaginatively enact thoughts like "I have salt in my mouth", "The tug of the current is strong upon me", "I am afraid"<sup>28</sup>. We could distinguish these two kinds of imagining by calling the former "objective" and the latter "subjective".

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Zeno Vendler (1979, 161): "We are looking down upon the ocean from a cliff. The water is rough and cold, yet there are some swimmers riding the waves. 'Just imagine swimming in that water' says my friend, and I know what to do. 'Brr!' I say as I imagine the cold, the salty taste, the tug of the current, and so forth. Had he said 'Just imagine yourself swimming in that water', I could comply in another way too: by picturing myself being tossed about, a scrawny body bobbing up and down in the foamy waste."



Noel Carroll worries that perspective-shifting ends up in putting the character in my shoes rather than putting myself in the character's shoes (Carroll 2011, 165-166), a criticism that echoes Hume's discussion of projection, according to which in putting ourselves to the other's shoes we merely use the other as a screen upon which our mind casts our personal narrative, thereby succumbing to common psychological fallacies resulting from egocentric bias, such as misattributions and personal distress (see Coplan 2011). No one doubts that this is a well founded criticism of perspective-taking. However, one can think of an empathizer that has a solid knowledge of the picture's narrative structure (as for example in the case of a 17th century historian who looks at a Tanner painting), in that case moderate perspective-taking can be successful. The point is that in subjectively imagining the other's perspective, what one does is to adopt aspects of the other's point of view without disregarding that one is able to do that through his own broader perspective; in other words, subjective imagination of the other's perspective is embedded in one's own perspective. So in the case of perspective taking, one tries to become a narrator of the depicted other's life circumstances and perspective, by using his own cognitive and emotional resources to develop more ways to tell the depicted character's story.

The fact that it is an active reconstruction of the depicted character's perspective does not mean that it is unconstrained, as for example wishful thinking. The process is constrained by the world-as-depicted and by one's own tacit knowledge about the world; moreover, the viewer is constrained by the conscious awareness that one is not imaginatively reconstructing one's own experience. It is true that, as Noel Carroll points out, 'no artist can say or depict everything that there is to say or depict about the fictional events she is narrating' (Carroll 2001, 138). The elements depicted and the extra-pictorial information support a narrative structure, that is later 'filled in' by the viewer (ibid, 140)<sup>29</sup>. I draw on intra-pictorial and extra-pictorial

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<sup>29</sup> My view has affinities with Noel Carroll's discussion of the relation of art to morality; according to Carroll (1996), "part of what is involved, then, in the process of filling in a narrative is the activation of the moral powers – the moral judgments and the moral emotions of audiences".

elements to fill-in the narration of the depiction; through this process of simulating experiencing the depicted situation I reenact aspects of the depicted situation and attempt to imagine the emotions and thoughts of the depicted figure. I put myself in the depicted person's shoes so that I may be able to discover tacit or implicit elements of the depiction's narrative structure. Empathizing through moderate perspective-taking is finding the best possible way to narrate the depicted character's story as his own story from a subjective point of view.

Another type of imaginative reconstruction from a subjective point of view that has been proposed is more demanding, in that one attempts to imagine *being* the other in the other's situation.

#### ***4.4 Strong Perspective-Taking for Empathetic Response to Pictures***

Person A empathizes with depicted character B if and only if A imagines being B and A centrally imagines feeling, cognizing, or perceiving what B feels, cognizes, or perceives, while A maintains the awareness that B is the source of A's own affective state and primarily belongs to B.

This process is referred as "empathetic perspective-shifting" (Goldie 2000) or "other-oriented perspective-taking" (Coplan 2011)<sup>30</sup>. Two issues come up:

(i) In describing both moderate perspective-taking and strong perspective-taking, should we include a condition that the empathizer not only imagines feeling, cognizing, or perceiving the depicted character's perspective but also that the empathizer thereby feels or partially shares what the depicted character feels? Berys Gaut follows this line of thinking and differentiates between identification as imagining what the character fictionally feels, and empathizing, which is imagining feeling what a character fictionally feels and actually feel what the character fictionally feels (Gaut 2005, 264).

My intuition is that if one affords to imaginatively enact the other's perspective and imagines feeling the depicted character's expressed

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<sup>30</sup> For some theorists, only perspective-taking in the strong sense is taken to be empathic in essence (Coplan, Smith 2011).

emotional state from a subjective point of view, then one's experience is much like having oneself that emotional state. Adam Morton has extensively defended the view that the experience of imagining an emotion resembles that of having one (Morton 2013). So if we accept that imagining the other's perspective from a subjective point of view is possible, we do not need to insist on sharing the same type of emotion as extra condition.

(ii) To imaginatively reconstruct the depicted character's perspective (either via moderate perspective-taking or via strong-perspective taking) one must have access to the picture's narrative structure; that is, to the story and the things it describes (an intra-pictorial narration), to the related historical and theoretical context (extra-pictorial narration) (see Currie 2007; Davies 2007)<sup>31</sup>. Furthermore, if strong-perspective taking is to be afforded, then the empathizer must be able to somehow take in all tacit background knowledge and unconscious dispositions that support and shape the character's thoughts, feelings and deliberations; as Goldie formulates it the empathizer has to have a "substantial characterization" of the character as narrator (Goldie 1999, 409). But are we able to imagine being the depicted character and thus entertain the other's own thoughts and feelings? In particular, can strong perspective-taking be applied to our emotional responses to pictures?

I think that although strong perspective taking seems closer to what some intuitively think when referring to genuine empathy, and it avoids in theory a lot of the problems that have to do with projection, such as psychological fallacies, it is nevertheless not phenomenologically and epistemically feasible. It seems implausible that one could imaginatively reconstruct the other's experience while *consistently* and *constantly* imagining being the other.

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<sup>31</sup> One would object that paintings or photographs are in fact non-narrative, since they depict a time-fragment rather than a series of events extending in time (see Ross 1982). However, it seems to me that this "snapshot" view for traditional depictive artworks sets the bar too high for what it takes for an artwork to be narrative and ignores artworks implicit narratives; under this conception only artworks such as Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* would be taken as narrative. Generally, fictional kinds provide background information relevant to the particular character/hero or to the situation presented. In the case of paintings this information comes from elements of the depiction, such as the clothes of the depicted characters or the background space as well as extra-pictorial information, such as the title, the artist or information about the time created.

I will briefly refer to a criticism along these lines that draws on Goldie's work, echoing some important insights from the phenomenological tradition (Richard Moran, Jean Paul Sartre). A depictive artwork, as already mentioned, provides pictorial and extra pictorial background information regarding the depicted character. This information might be enough for me to feel how I myself would feel in the depicted character's situation, but in order to imagine being the depicted character, I would have to be able to somehow take in all tacit background knowledge and unconscious dispositions that support and shape the character's thoughts, feelings and deliberations. As Goldie (2011, 308) argues, if I am to imagine being the other, I must share not just her thoughts and feelings, but also her traits of character, intellectual traits and abilities, emotional dispositions, and non rational influences. However, even if it were possible for me to enter one's own tacit background knowledge and unconscious dispositions through empathic imagination, I would have distorted the other person's access to her own mental states, since I would have imposed to her a kind of psychological distance from her own thoughts and feelings. Our access to our conscious thoughts and feelings is intimate because it rests on the possession of tacit background knowledge and unconscious dispositions. But if empathic imagination is taken to afford access both to conscious thoughts and feelings and to tacit background knowledge and unconscious dispositions, then it distorts both aspects of the empathized mind<sup>32</sup>.

Put more generally, our access to our own mental states can be reflective or non-reflective. Ordinarily, our access to our mental states is non-reflective, our mental acts are transparent to us and we are intentionally directed towards their content. Reflection destroys this transparency and makes mental acts its object. But still the very act of reflection remains transparent to us. Namely we are non-reflectively aware of it. In sum, every conscious mental state involves two different kinds of awareness: the awareness of its content and the awareness of its act. The former is objectifying whereas the latter non-objectifying. SPT seems to presuppose the existence only of the former kind of awareness in seeking to

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<sup>32</sup> I would misrepresent the sense of agency into a "double-minded" thinking, both deliberative or practical and theoretical or empirical' (Goldie 2011, 310).

imaginatively reconstruct the fictional character's thoughts, feelings, deliberations, and so forth. Thus, strong perspective-taking starts from a distorted conception of what it amounts for one to access one's own mind.

## **5. Conclusion**

We have seen that there are many types of empathetic responses to pictures and rarely any of them appears alone, independently of other types of empathetic or emotional responses. They can be passive and immediate, involving simulation at the sub-personal or personal level or they can be direct perceptions of the depicted character's expressed emotions; other empathetic responses can be active, involving kinds of simulative imagination. In some cases, pictures acquaint us with aspects of the depicted character's emotional perspective; other times, we engage with the depicted characters by employing active simulation processes. We imaginatively reconstruct the depicted character's perspective from a subjective point of view and become better narrators of the depicted other's emotional experience. We can be good at it but we can also fail; however, the idea that in order to really respond empathetically we would have to imagine being the depicted character by embracing his broader perspective is flawed since it would inevitably eliminate the presence of one's own perspective in the imaginative process. Moreover, as I argued, one could not imaginatively reconstruct the other's experience while consistently and constantly imagining being the other. The upshot is that strong perspective-taking does not provide a sound approach for empathetic response to pictorial artworks. The active imaginative reconstruction of the depicted character's perspective should be understood on the lines of what I called moderate perspective-taking.

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