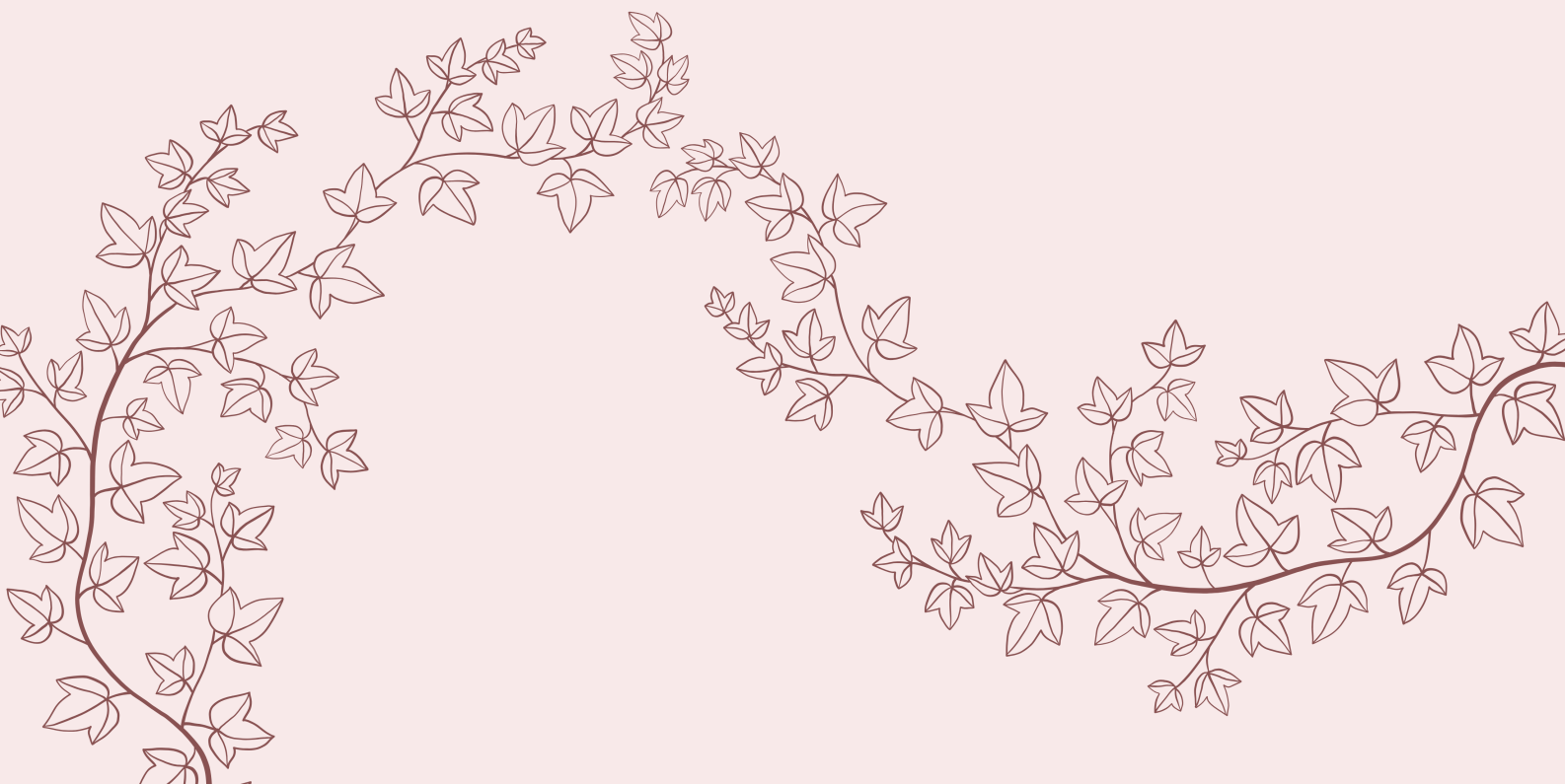




Empathy and Merleau-Ponty

Emily Richael is senior studying philosophy at Brigham Young University. She is interested in philosophy of mind and emotion, particularly as they relate to empathy. She has been published in two other undergraduate philosophy journals: Brigham Young University's Aporia and Rutgers' Areté. In her free time she enjoys exploring the outdoors in her home state of Idaho, reading, and writing.



We commonly think of empathy as an epistemic pursuit. When we empathize with someone, we aim to know what they are feeling. But this knowledge is difficult to attain considering the fact that we have no direct access to someone else's private mind. Minds are not observable; they are hidden behind bodies, making bodies one of empathy's biggest hurdles. To know what someone else is feeling, we have to get inside their head. One way in which we might attempt to do this is by imagining what it is like to be someone else. In colloquial terms, we might "put ourselves in someone else's shoes." We attempt to skirt their embodiment by using our imagination. Since we cannot directly access other people's minds, perhaps imagining their situation will afford us knowledge about what they are feeling.

However, Amy Coplan has called into question the epistemic effectiveness of this method. She suggests that putting ourselves in other people's shoes (hereafter called "perspective taking") leads to projection and misrepresentation rather than knowledge of another's emotional state. Trying to transcend the body actually leads us to distort the other person's subjective experience. In light of this concern, I suggest that we think about empathy in a different way. An account of empathy informed by Merleau-Ponty's idea of embodied minds can lead us to knowledge about what other people are feeling. This is because, according to Merleau-Ponty, we should not assume that minds are hidden behind bodies. We can know what other people are feeling because emotions are embodied. We need to abandon the idea that in order to access another person's mind we have to circumvent the body. Our bodies play a central role in empathy; they are the medium through which we communicate our emotions.

The paper will proceed as follows: in section 1, I will describe the process of perspective taking and explain why it fails to grant us knowledge of other minds according to Amy Coplan. Due to this epistemic failure, I suggest that we abandon the assumption that perspective taking operates from, namely, the fact that minds are hidden behind bodies. Instead, we should move towards a picture

of empathy informed by Merleau-Ponty because it can grant us knowledge. In section 2, I will use Søren Overgaard's paper "Other Minds Embodied" to explain why Merleau-Ponty rejects the idea that minds are hidden and inaccessible. Merleau-Ponty argues that minds are embodied and therefore, emotions are perceptible. However, just perceiving someone's emotion does not lead to knowledge. In section 3, I will demonstrate that embodied emotions also need signification in order for us to understand them. Ultimately, we can know what someone else is feeling because emotions are embodied and because body language has meaning. Finally, In section 4, I will outline how this analysis of Merleau-Ponty might inform an improved conception of empathy. Merleau-Ponty saves us from having to try on other people's shoes.

1. Epistemic Failure of Perspective Taking

Putting ourselves in someone else's shoes, also known as self-oriented perspective taking, leads us to project our own feelings onto the other. Self-oriented perspective taking involves an empathizer imaginatively replacing the target (i.e., the other person) with themselves. Consider a relatively simple example: if I were attempting to empathize with an actor who forgot their line on stage, I would imaginatively replace the actor with myself and note the emotional state that the situation prompts for me. I would imagine myself forgetting a line on stage—an incident which would likely cause me feelings of anxiety and embarrassment. Then, I assume that my own feelings represent the actor's internal experience.

Amy Coplan objects to this form of perspective taking because when we replace the target with ourselves, we are no longer empathizing with the target at all. We are merely empathizing with ourselves in the target's situation.¹ Earlier, when I imagined how I would respond if I forgot a line on stage, the actor played no role in

¹ Amy Coplan, "Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects," in *Empathy, Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, eds. Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 9.

my simulation. Because I was imagining myself in their place, nothing about the actor was incorporated into my simulation besides their situation. When I imagined how I would respond in their situation, I learned nothing about how they would respond in their situation. Self-oriented perspective taking fails as a route to knowledge because a given circumstance will not elicit the same emotional state for everyone (e.g., forgetting a line on stage does not always lead to embarrassment). How I mentally respond to forgetting a line on stage is not necessarily indicative of what the confident actor is experiencing. Therefore, based on my self-oriented simulation, it would be wrong for me to claim that I know what it is like to be the actor in that moment. When I conclude that the actor is embarrassed, I am merely projecting my own feelings of embarrassment onto them.

Take another example demonstrating how two people might have a drastically different mental response to the same situation. Say that my husband is trying to understand what it is like for me, a woman, to walk down the riverside path behind our apartment complex at night. My husband loves night walks, so if he were to imagine himself going on the stroll alone, he would likely report feeling relaxed and rejuvenated after the simulation. This, however, is far from what I would experience alone on the same night walk. My primary feelings would be anxiety at the prospect of being uncomfortably approached or catcalled—the exact opposite of what my husband reported feeling. If my husband were to project his simulated mental state onto me, it would be a gross misrepresentation of my feelings. The exercise fails to grant him knowledge about my mental state because our minds respond differently to the same night walk. Self-oriented simulation leaves him with knowledge about himself in my situation—he now knows that he would enjoy the riverside trail at night—but it does not get him any closer to understanding my emotional state.

If we view the body as an obstacle to be overcome in order to know what people are feeling, then we end up with a distorted picture of their emotional state. We think that the disembodied process of imagination can grant us knowledge about other minds,

but ultimately it leads us farther away from understanding. However, the main problem with perspective taking is not the process; it is the assumption that other minds are private and not directly observable. Merleau-Ponty rejects this solipsistic idea, and demonstrates how minds are, in fact, perceivable. He provides a way for us to think about empathy that does not presuppose the inaccessibility of other minds. An empathetic method that involves bodies rather than trying to avoid them ultimately proves to be much more successful at providing us with knowledge of other people's emotional states.

2. Merleau-Ponty and Embodied Minds

Overgaard argues that Merleau-Ponty is not troubled by the idea of other minds. Merleau-Ponty thinks that “what we have said about the body provides the beginnings of a solution to this problem.”² When we consider the fact that our bodies are an expression of our minds rather than a container for them, the problem of other minds dissolves. Having a mind entails a certain sort of being in the world. Seeing other beings engage in the world in the same manner that we do confirms their mindedness. Merleau-Ponty says:

If the perceiving subject appears (to me who is reflecting upon perception) as endowed with a primordial arrangement in relation to the world, drawing with it that bodily thing without which there would be no other things for it, then why should the other bodies that I perceive not be equally inhabited by consciousnesses? If my consciousness has a body, why should other bodies not ‘have’ consciousness?³

The scare quotes around “have” indicate Merleau-Ponty's distaste for mind-body dualism. He does not think, as a Cartesian might, that our bodies are fleshy machines housing an immaterial mind. In other words, our minds are not embodied—we are embodied minds. Other minds are not hidden behind bodies, other minds are other

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 364.

³ Merleau-Ponty, 366–7.

bodies.⁴ Merleau-Ponty denies the ontological gap between minds and bodies and instead claims, “I am my body.”⁵

The upshot of Overgaard’s analysis is that emotions are observable. If the activity of other minds is not hidden, then we have immediate access to other people’s emotional states. According to Merleau-Ponty, the emotions of other minds are perceptible in at least two different ways. First, Overgaard alludes to the fact that minds entail a certain sort of being in the world. Our world is shaped and colored by affect—a feature of our being that is observable to others. Merleau-Ponty says:

I perceive the other’s grief or anger in his behavior, on his face and in his hands, without any borrowing from an inner experience of suffering or of anger and because grief and anger are variations of being in the world, undivided between body and consciousness, which settle upon the other’s behavior and are visible in his phenomenal body, as well as upon my own behavior such as it is presented to me.⁶

How other people feel shows up in the ways that they engage with the world, even if their emotion is not explicit. For example, someone might be engaging with the world as if they are tired without themselves even knowing that they are tired. A child might assure their parents before bedtime that they are not tired even though they are irritable. The parent knows that the child is communicating their tiredness because of the ways it presents itself in their embodiment. The child’s emotions still show up in the world and to their parents without the child’s awareness.

Merleau-Ponty also makes a crucial point in the same quote about not needing to consult our own experience with an emotion in order to know what someone is feeling. For example, when I see a friend who is grieving the loss of one of their parents, I do not need to imagine myself in their situation in order to know that they

⁴ Overgaard, Søren, “Other minds embodied,” *Continental Philosophy Review*, 50 (1): 70.

⁵ Merleau-Ponty, 205.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, 372.

are in pain. I also do not need to analyze their behavior before concluding that they are sad. As Merleau-Ponty says, “without any borrowing from an inner experience of suffering,” I can observe how their engagement with the world changes, and know that they are grieving. I might see that they are unmotivated, less social, and less active. This deviation from their typical mode of being in the world communicates their sadness. However, it is not just that certain behaviors communicate sadness. The sadness is the behavior; the emotion is a way of being in the world.

Another way in which our embodied emotions are observable is through specific body language. As an example, Merleau-Ponty draws on the idea of an angry gesture:

Consider an angry or threatening gesture. In order to understand these gestures, I have no need of recalling the feelings I experienced while I myself performed these same gestures. I have, from the inside, quite a limited knowledge of the gesture of anger, and so an association through resemblance or reasoning by analogy would be missing a decisive element. [. . .] The gesture does not make me think of anger, it is the anger itself.⁷

The angry gesture is distinct from someone’s mode of being in the world because it is a specific movement. It is one position that embodies anger. For example, I might see an angry driver flip the bird to someone who cut them off. I do not know how this driver engages with the world, but from one gesture, I understand what they are feeling. Furthermore, I do not derive my understanding that the driver is angry from analyzing the gesture and pausing to think about what it might mean. I immediately perceive that they are angry. The gesture alone, without any reasoning on my part, communicates the anger. Hence Merleau-Ponty’s words: “the gesture does not make me think of anger, it is the anger itself.” Anyone who has received a middle finger from an angry driver can validate Merleau-Ponty’s claim. Their anger is immediately received without any need to ponder the gesture’s meaning. The driver’s

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, 190.

feeling is wholly embodied in the gesture, and thus directly observable.

3. Signification and Knowledge

Up to this point I have only emphasized the importance of the body in knowing other people's emotions. But Merleau-Ponty also acknowledges another crucial aspect of understanding another person's emotional state: signification. W. E. S. McNeill's paper, "On Seeing That Someone is Angry," argues for a similar condition which he calls inference. I will draw on McNeill's paper to help make sense of Merleau-Ponty's argument. McNeill holds that we can only perceive the gesture as the anger itself if we understand that the gesture means anger. The specific position of their middle finger only communicates anger if the receiver of the gesture understands that the gesture is meant to convey anger. We have to understand the meaning of body language in order to grasp someone else's emotion.⁸

For example, say that in another country people use the peace sign much like we use the middle finger. The peace sign is their gesture to communicate anger. If I were to visit their country and see someone make a peace sign, I would be unphased or confused. This demonstrates that the gesture itself is arbitrary, but the meaning must be mutually understood. McNeill argues from this that inference is a necessary component of understanding someone else's embodied emotion. To understand that the peace sign means anger, I first have to connect the gesture to the emotion of anger. Merleau-Ponty makes a similar point using a child viewing a sexual scene:

If a child accidentally witnessed a sexual scene, he can understand it without having the experience of desire or the bodily attitudes that it expresses, but if the child had not yet reached the degree of maturity at which this behavior becomes a possibility for him,

⁸ W. E. S. McNeill, "On Seeing That Someone is Angry," *European Journal of Philosophy*, 20: 577.

then the sexual scene will remain merely an unusual and disturbing spectacle, it will not make sense.⁹

The child is not able to perceive the parent's emotion without understanding the significance of their body language. Similarly, our ability to know about other people's emotions depends on both embodiment and inference. Emotions are embodied, but in order for someone else to know what we are feeling, there has to be a mutual understanding of what the body language means. Embodied emotions are perceivable, but they are only comprehensible if they have a shared meaning.

However, this is not to say that every time we perceive someone else's emotion we have to make the inference again. It is not that every time I see the angry gesture I have to recall that the gesture means anger. This would undermine what Merleau-Ponty said earlier that "[we] have, from the inside, quite a limited knowledge of the gesture of anger, and so an association through resemblance or reasoning by analogy would be missing a decisive element."¹⁰ There must be some point when we make the inference that a gesture means anger. We are not born with the knowledge that a middle finger is angry. But after the inference is made, the body language takes on meaning without any further need for inference. After the child reaches an age of maturity where the sexual scene has meaning, he does not have to consciously associate the scene with certain emotions. The emotions arise without having to make any inference. In Merleau-Ponty's view, perception of emotions is not strictly innate or inferential. There is a role for both embodiment and inference to play in helping us understand another person's emotional state.

4. Merleau-Pontian Empathy

Bringing this all back to empathy, an empathetic method informed by Merleau-Ponty would look very different from putting ourselves

⁹ Merleau-Ponty, 190.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, 190.

in someone else's shoes. According to Merleau-Ponty, understanding other people's emotions arises naturally from the fact that emotions are observable and that there is shared meaning in their embodiment. Knowing what other people feel is much less of a feat when we reject the idea that emotions are hidden behind bodies. In fact, Merleau-Ponty would likely say that asking how we know what other people feel is an ill-formed question. Other people's emotions are already given to us in their embodiment. If we ask how we can know what other people feel, we are assuming that their emotions are hidden. Merleau-Ponty argues that emotions show up in how we engage with the world and in our body language. Empathy, then, is not trying to "access" what someone else is feeling. It is simply being attentive to another's body language and patterns of being in the world. By doing so, we will gain far more knowledge about their emotional state than if we try to imagine it.

To demonstrate how this Merleau-Pontian approach will grant us knowledge as opposed to perspective taking, let us return to the riverside trail example. When my husband tried to imagine how I felt on the riverside trail, he ended up misrepresenting my feelings by projecting his own experience onto me. Merleau-Ponty would say that my husband failed to understand my feelings because he avoided, rather than attended to my embodiment. My emotions are embodied, and are therefore only perceptible through my embodiment. In order to know what I am feeling on the night walk, my husband needs to observe my body language and how I am engaging with the world. My husband might notice that during night walks I am quiet and tense. He perceives my anxiety through the way that my being in the world changed. His attention to my body language is what gives him knowledge about my emotional state. My husband has a much better idea of how I feel from perceiving my embodied emotions than from trying to take my perspective. Obtaining knowledge of other people's emotional states is simple: just exist and perceive. No imaginative gymnastics is needed in order to understand what other people feel. If we can observe emotions as Merleau-Ponty suggests, empathy only requires that we be perceivers of them.

Conclusion

Merleau-Ponty's perspective on other minds can completely change how we understand empathy. Empathy is not a process of bridging the wide gulf between individually encapsulated minds. Nor is it about "accessing" other people's minds. For too long, we have assumed solipsism and prescribed empathy as the antidote. But when we reject solipsism, empathy can be reborn. In light of Merleau-Ponty's idea that emotions are perceivable, empathy is not understanding other people despite our embodiment. Empathy is understanding other people because of our embodiment. As Merleau-Ponty says, "the perception of others and the plurality of consciousnesses no longer present any difficulty."¹¹ We no longer need empathy to escape the hopeless problem of other minds; our feelings are already perceivable. We can take heart in the fact that we no longer need to put ourselves in other people's shoes.

Bibliography

- Coplan, Amy. "Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects." In *Empathy, Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*. Edited by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, 3–18. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- McNeill, W. E. S. "On Seeing That Someone is Angry," *European Journal of Philosophy*, 20: 575–597.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. New York, Routledge, 2012.
- Overgaard, Søren. "Other minds embodied," *Continental Philosophy Review*, 50 (1): 65–80, 2016.

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, 366.