

Perspectives on Other Minds' Problem

Elizabeth Oluwafunmilayo Kehinde, Ph.D.

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts

University of Lagos

ekehinde@unilag.edu.ng/ oluekehinde18@gmail.com

and

Sirajudeen Owosho, Ph.D.

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts

University of Lagos

sowosho@unilag.edu.ng/ owogrnh@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper investigates the question of the problem of 'others' within the scope of philosophy of mind. The problem of other minds in philosophy is an epistemological problem. It is the problem concerned with how our beliefs about the mental states other than our own might be justified. Some philosophers agree that the problem of other minds is concerned with the fundamental issue of what entitles us to our basic belief that other human beings (individual or persons) do have inner lives rather than whether we are able in specific cases to be sure what is happening in those inner lives. The aim of this paper is to explore the fundamental philosophical issue concerning other minds from various perspectives, and show that Husserl's method of transcendental phenomenology is a more plausible attempt in resolving the problem of other minds. This position evolves from the fact that, Husserl in his numerous essays and presentations, has always intended that his phenomenology becomes a universal and objective principle of ascertaining the truth about understanding the other. His method therefore comfortably allows us to experience and understand the feelings, desires, and beliefs of others in a more direct manner.

Key Words: Mind; Others; Epistemology; Transcendence; Phenomenology.

Introduction

Traditionally and historically, the problem of other minds has been alive in philosophy at least since the inception of the Cartesian private theatre model of the mind. According to this model, the mind is a private realm, an inner landscape or theatre, accessible only from the first-person perspective. If the mind and its

contents are accessible exclusively from the first-person perspective, then serious doubts arise – at least in the arena of philosophical debate if not in everyday life – as to whether anyone other than oneself has a mind, although, Descartes did not notice it as a separate problem. However, it would seem that Thomas Reid should be credited with seeing that there was a serious philosophical issue concerning other minds.¹ As Somerville rightly confirmed, “indeed, it seems that the first frequent use of the words 'other minds' is to be credited to him”² It is noteworthy that the problem of other minds came to prominence as a philosophical problem only as recently as the nineteenth century, when John Stuart Mill gave us what is generally regarded as a version of the analogical inference to other minds. His version of the problem has as its centerpiece the causal link between our mental states and our behaviour.³

Among the continental philosophers, perhaps, Husserl can be credited with establishing the problems of other minds as serious and challenging. His phenomenological method of investigating the true essence of things eventually led him to locate the source of all meanings in transcendental subjectivity. The subjective ego however has its limitation; this is because it can only comprehend what is given to it in experience. How can we know the other mind? The difficulty arising from this led Husserl to take up the challenge of the problem of other minds.

Perspectives on the Problem of Other Minds

In recent years, much of the discussion of the nature of social cognition has taken place within the framework of the so called theory of mind debate. The expression theory of mind is generally used as shorthand for our ability to attribute mental behaviour in terms of mental states such as intentions, beliefs, and desires.⁴ The

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1. Anita Avramides, *Other Minds*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 6.
 2. James Somerville, “Making Out the Signatures” in M. Dalgarno and E. Mathews (eds), *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), 249
 3. John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic* (London: Longman, 1970), 237-238
 4. David Premack and Guy Woodruff, “Does the Chimpanzee Have a Theory of Mind” *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* 4, No. 4 (1978): 515.

simulation theory was championed by Robert Gordon, Jane Heal, Paul Harris and Alvin Goldman. Robert Gordon was the first to develop this theory in the present era, suggesting that we can predict others' behaviour by answering the question: "what would I do in that person's situation?" This theory holds that we use our own mind as a model for understanding the mind of others. According to this account, human beings are able to use the resources of their own minds to simulate the psychological etiology of the behaviour of others, typically by making decisions within a pretend context.⁵ Goldman has recently argued that a necessary condition for mindreading is that the state ascribed to the target is ascribed as a result of the attributor's instantiating, undergoing, or experiencing, that very state.⁶ Indeed, on Goldman's account, an attributor arrives at a mental attribution by simulating, replicating, or reproducing in his own mind the same as the target's own or by attempting to do so.⁷

The theory-theory of mind is another popular perspective on the problem of other minds. This theory of mind asserts that individuals hold a basic or naive theory of psychology to infer the mental states of others, such as their desires, emotions and beliefs, and use this information to understand the intentions behind that person's actions or predict future behaviour.⁸ In essence, this theory simply argues that our understanding of others mainly engages detached intellectual processes moving by inference from one belief to the other.⁹

Another perspective on the problem of other minds is Logical Behaviourism. This

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5. Robert Gordon, "Folk Psychology as Simulation", in M. Davies and T. Stone (eds), *Folk Psychology: The Theory of Mind Debate*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 53-67
 6. Alvin Goldman and Chandra S. Stripada, "Simulationist Models of Face-Based Emotion Recognition" *Cognition* 94 (2005): 208.
 7. Goldman and Stripada, "Simulationist Models of Face-Based Emotion Recognition", 194
 8. Matthew Ratcliffe, "Folk Psychology is not Folk Psychology" *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 5 (2006): 31-52.
 9. Dan Zahavi, "Empathy Embodiment and Interpersonal Understanding: from Lipps to Schutz" *Inquiry* 53, no. 3 (2010): 286

theory of mind holds that what is directly observable is all there is. Accordingly, the existence of mental entities is straightforwardly denied since such entities are not available for direct observation. In terms of the other minds problem, logical behaviourists hold that we find out about other people only through observing what they say and do, and mental states are just what people say and do. For most behaviourists, talk of mental states has meaning only if it can be translated into physical language which is empirically verifiable. A prominent proponent of this theory is Rudolph Carnap.¹⁰

The “Criteriological Argument” is a version of behaviourism theory. The central tenet of this approach is that behaviour is the “logical adequate criterion for determining the correctness of other minds statements”, so that all terms have public meaning only. This is because the meaning of words referring to psychological states are strictly univocal, we can justly believe that other people are happy simply by determining if they are using their words correctly. The most eloquent proponent of this theory is Ludwig Wittgenstein.¹¹

Identity theory of mind holds that all mental states are wholly translatable into physical terms, though neurophysical terms which apply to brain states appear at the micro level rather than the observable level of behaviour. Mental states are exclusively occurrences according to the identity theory.¹²

Proponents of “Transcendental Argument” approach holds that the existence of language, or the intuitive access we have of our own mind, presupposes warranted belief in other minds. On this approach, the problem of other minds arises because it seems that I can be aware of the existence of my own mind without being warranted in believing in other minds. P.F. Strawson is a famous representative of this theory of

10. Rudolf Carnap, “Psychology of Physical Language”, in *Essays on Other Minds*, ed. T. O. Buford, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 69-110.

11. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 178

12. Owen Flanagan, *Science of the Mind*, (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1984), 58

mind.¹³

Inference to the best explanation theory holds that the mental states of human beings are what cause them to behave as they do. So, the inference to their having minds is one based on that, being the best explanation for the way they behave.¹⁴ Intuition approach to the problem of other minds holds that the mental states of others is known by others is direct in so far as it occurs in the absence of inference, causes of justifications. Introspection, for example has often been labeled as a kind of intuition, since it does not make obvious sense to infer a statement such as “I am happy”. Direct access to the mental states of other people, by comparison, means that these states are immediately encountered by a route such as telepathy.¹⁵

However, the traditional and most celebrated solution to the problem of other minds has been the one based on *Argument from Analogy*, that is, analogical inference to other minds. Argument from analogy is a special type of inductive argument in which perceived similarities is used as a basis to infer some further similarities that are yet to be observed. It is a classical attempt to come to grips with the problem of intersubjectivity. The argument holds that: The only mind I have direct access to is my own. My access to the mind of another is always mediated by his bodily behavior. The question then is: How can the perception of another person's body provide me with information about his mind? The argument from analogy provides that, starting from my own mind and linking it to the way in which my body is given to me, I then pass to the other's body and by noticing the analogy that exists between this body and my own body, I infer that the foreign body is probably also linked in a similar manner mind. That is, other human beings are very like me, they behave very

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13. Peter F. Strawson, “Persons”, in *Essays on Other Minds*, ed. T.O. Buford, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 170.
 14. Henry H. Price, “Our Evidence for the Existence of Other Minds”, in *Essays on Other Minds*, ed. T. O. Buford (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1970), 183.
 15. Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, Trans. P. Heelth, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 12-13

much as I do in similar circumstances and they are made of the same stuff. In my own case, screaming is often associated with pain; when I observe others screaming, I infer that it is likely that they are also feeling pain. Although this inference doesn't provide me with indubitable knowledge about others, and although, it doesn't allow me to actually experience other minds, at least it gives me more reason to believe in their existence, than for denying it.¹⁶

The account of analogical argument has been met with much criticism from philosophers notably Ryle and Wittgenstein,¹⁷ and also from phenomenologists. For example, Scheler argues that to assume that our belief in the existence of other minds is inferential in nature is, to opt for a far too complex cognitive account. After all, both animals and infants seem to share this belief, but in their case, it is hardly the result of a process of inference.¹⁸ Scheler maintains that in order for the argument to work, there has to be a similarity between the way in which my own body is given to me, and the way in which the body of the other is given to me. But my own body as it is felt proprioceptively for me does not at all resemble the other's body as it is perceived visually by me.¹⁹

According to Scheler, how can the argument from analogy explain that we can empathise with creatures whose bodies in no way resemble our own, say a suffering bird or fish?²⁰ He insists that even if all of these problems could be overcome, the argument from analogy would still be formally invalid. Noticing the connection between my own mind and my bodily behaviour, and the analogy between my own bodily behaviour and the behaviour of a foreign body, all that I am entitled to infer is

16. Mill, *A System of Logic*, 237-238

17. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 52; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Trans. By G.E.M Anscombe, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2001), 178.

18. Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, Trans. Peter Heath Hamden, (London: Routledge & Kegan Press, 1970), 232

19. Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, 232

20. Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, 233

that the foreign body is probably also linked with my own mind.²¹

Based on the foregoing criticism, Scheler proceeds further to examine two of the crucial presuppositions in the argument from analogy. First the argument assumes that my point of departure is my own consciousness. This is what is at first given to me in a quite direct and unmediated fashion, and it is this purely mental self-experience which is taken to precede and make possible the recognition of others. Second, the argument assumes that we never have direct access to another person's consciousness. We can never experience their thoughts or feelings. We can only infer that they must exist on the basis of that which is actually given to us, namely their bodily appearance. Although both of these two assumptions might seem perfectly obvious, Scheler rejects both. According to Zahavi, Scheler denies that our initial self-acquaintance is of a purely mental nature, and that it takes place in isolation from others.²² As Scheler puts it, the argument from analogy underestimates the difficulties involved in self-experience and overestimates the difficulties involved in the experience of others.²³ However, Scheler also denies that we only perceive the physical appearance of the other, and that we then, in a subsequent move, have to infer the existence of a foreign subjectivity. Scheler writes:

For we certainly believe ourselves to be directly acquainted with another person's joy in his laughter, with his sorrow and pain in his tears, with his shame in his blushing, with his entreaty in his outstretched hands, with his love in his look of affection, with his rage in the gnashing of his teeth, with his threats in the clenching of his fist, and with the tenor of his thoughts in the sound of

21. Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, 234

22. Dan Zahavi, "Beyond Empathy: Phenomenological Approaches to Intersubjectivity", *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8, no. 5 (2001): 152

23. *The Nature of Sympathy*, 244-246

his words. If anyone tells me that this is not 'perception', for it cannot be so, in view of the fact that a perception is simply a 'complex of physical sensations', and that there is certainly no sensation of another person's mind nor any stimulus from such a source, I would beg him to turn aside from such questionable theories and address himself to the phenomenological facts.²⁴

On the basis of considerations like these, it has been argued by Zahavi, that those in the face-to-face encounter, are either confronted with a mere body, nor with a hidden psyche, but with a unified whole.²⁵ Thus, a solution to the problem of other minds must start with a correct understanding of the relation between mind and body. In some sense, experiences are not internal; they are not hidden in the head, but rather expressed in bodily gestures and actions. As illustrated by Zahavi: when I see a foreign face, I see it as friendly or angry, etc.; that is, the very face expresses these emotions, I don't have to infer their existence. Moreover, bodily behaviour is meaningful, if it is intentional, and as such it is neither internal nor external, but rather beyond this artificial distinction. For the very same reason we should realise that the body of the other differs radically from inanimate objects, and that our perception of this body is quite unlike our ordinary perception of objects.²⁶

Furthermore, Zahavi maintains that, that I have an actual experience of the other, and do not have to do with a mere inference, does not imply, however, that I can experience the other in the same way as she herself does, nor that the other's consciousness is accessible to me in the same way as my own is.²⁷ But this is not a problem; on the contrary, it is only because of this difference that foreign

24. Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, 254

25. Zahavi, "Beyond Empathy", 152-153

26. Zahavi, "Beyond Empathy", 153

27. Zahavi, "Beyond Empathy", 153

subjectivity is at all experienced as foreign. This is well articulated by Husserl when he writes: had one had the same access to the other's consciousness as to one's own, the other would have ceased being an other, and would instead have become a part of oneself. To put it another way, the self-givenness of the other is inaccessible and transcendent to me, but it is exactly this inaccessibility, this limit, which I can experience.²⁸ And when I do have an authentic experience of another subject, I am exactly experiencing that the other eludes me. Thus, the givenness of the other is of a most peculiar kind. As Levinas put it, "the absence of the other is exactly his presence as other."²⁹

In his analysis of the submissions of Husserl and Levinas, Zahavi maintains that, the otherness of the other is exactly manifest in his elusiveness and inaccessibility. To demand more, to claim that I would only have a real experience of the other if I experienced her feelings or thoughts in the same way as she herself does, is nonsensical.³⁰ For Zahavi, it would imply that I would only experience an other, if I experienced her in the same way that I experience myself, i.e., it would lead to an abolition of the difference between self and other, to a negation of the alterity of the other, of that which makes the other other.³¹

We can say that there is much of value in this criticism of the *Argument from Analogy*, and it can serve well as exemplification of a certain type of approach to intersubjectivity, an approach which Zahavi calls the model of *empathy* or the *empathic* approach. This approach rejects the idea that the relation between self and other is established by way of analogical inference, and instead argues for the existence of a specific mode of consciousness, called *empathy*, which is taken to allow us to experience and understand the feelings, desires, and beliefs of others in a

28. Zahavi, "Beyond Empathy", 144

29. Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and The Other*, Trans. Richard A. Cohen, (Pittsburgh, P.A: Duquesne University Press, 2002), 89

30. Zahavi, "Beyond Empathy", 153

31. Zahavi, "Beyond Empathy", 153

more-or-less direct manner. To be more specific, empathy is typically taken to constitute a unique and irreducible form of intentionality and one of the traditional tasks of this approach has consequently been to spell out the difference between empathy and other forms of intentionality, such as perception, imagination, and recollection. This descriptive enterprise has often been associated with the phenomenological tradition; in fact, that empathic approach has occasionally been taken to constitute the phenomenological approach to intersubjectivity, particularly the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl.

Husserl argues that in the life-world (the prescientific world of experience) we do actually perceive the presence of others, one does not just see their bodies, but also the consciousness behind it, as well as the emotion, or will, that person is experiencing at that point.³² Husserl refers to this perception as empathy; the ability to see the other as an example of foreign psychic life and of a willing 'I'.³³ The problem of others can then be phrased as the problem of explaining the structure of human empathy, and how it works to constitute awareness of other persons and the origination of the capacity of empathy.

Usserl's Perspective on the Problem of Other Minds

Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is an attempt to produce a genuinely fundamental philosophical analysis through concentration on the immediate phenomenal content of human external and inner experience and perception.³⁴ The cardinal objective of this phenomenological approach is essentially to determine and analyse the most basic preconditions of human experience and perception, by abstracting from all the content of human consciousness, knowledge and cognition that is not immediately and intuitively given to consciousness. Husserl argues that

32. A.D. Smith, *Routledge Philosophical Guidebook to Husserl and the Cartesian Meditations*, (London: Routledge, 2003), 215.

33. Smith, *Routledge Philosophical Guidebook*., 213

34. Edo Pivcevic, *Husserl and Phenomenology*, (London: Hustchinsin & Co. 1970), 13

whilst every theory influence about an experience may be doubted, the existence of the phenomenal content of the experience itself is beyond doubt.³⁵ Through this process of abstraction, Husserl hoped to provide a completely presuppositionless and hence indisputable basis for philosophical analysis, particularly of the individual human subjectivity.³⁶

For Husserl, phenomenology attempts an analysis of the mind from the first person perspective in an attempt to understand the basic constitution of the world from the individual human subjective position.³⁷ Husserl's phenomenological approach parallels the method of Cartesian scepticism, except that, Husserl's approach is more radical, not only laying aside all beliefs about experience but going deeper to analyse the fundamental preconditions of the possibility of phenomenal experience itself. It is the contention of Husserl that the physical science could never provide a truly fundamental analysis of reality, because they uncritically accept a natural attitude towards the world of naïve realism,³⁸ which is an assumption, not a phenomenal given. Their commitment to objective empirical evidence prevents analysis of the phenomenal view and human subjectivity.³⁹ Husserl further argues that since each person views the world solely through the perspective of individual subjectivity, to abstract from that subjectivity is to erase the fundamental source of human knowledge.

35. Smith, *Routledge Philosophical Guidebook.*, 17

36. Pivcevic, *Husserl and Phenomenology*, 13

37. Pivcevic, *Husserl and Phenomenology*, 43

38. Naïve realism, also known as direct realism or common sense realism holds that the world is exactly as it is. It is a philosophy of mind rooted in a theory of perception, which claims that, the senses provide us with direct awareness of the world. We perceive objects as they really are. That is, they are composed of matter, they occupy space and have properties, such as size, shape, texture, smell, taste and colour and they are usually perceived correctly. According to this view, objects obey the laws of physics and retain all their properties whether or not there is anyone to observe them; their properties and perception independent.

39. Pivcevic, *Husserl and Phenomenology*, 14

Husserl's starting point for this process is the concept of intentionality; the recognition that human consciousness is defined as consciousness of something; seeing, hearing, and remembering all refer to an object of experience.⁴⁰ This concept provides an intimate connection between mental action and the objects of both the external world and the internal content of the mind, and demonstrates that mental content and phenomenal experience, whether external or internal are fundamentally and inseparably linked. Thus, a fundamental analysis of human mental action and phenomenal experience requires an analysis of these mental intentional acts that link the two.⁴¹ It is also imperative to mention that another essential concept underlying Husserl's phenomenological analysis is the phenomenological reductions that occur through *epoche*. *Epoche* is the abstraction from all theoretical and inferential content of experience. Husserl refers to it as a bracketing of theory, whether scientific or philosophical, or suspension of all judgement on the nature and significance of the phenomenal content of experience, everything that we cognitively lay onto the immediately given content of external and internal experience.⁴² Husserl is not advocating skepticism of scientific or philosophical knowledge, but rather attempting to lay these to one side to analyse the most basic question of how we build our everyday world from phenomenal consciousness, which all such knowledge presupposes.⁴³ The *epoche* in turn makes possible the phenomenological reduction to and exclusive focus on only that content left unbracketed by the *epoche*.⁴⁴ This phenomenological residuum is generally identified with the immediately given content of intuition, the concept of the experience itself, whether or outer perception or inner awareness of consciousness.⁴⁵

40. Dan Zahavi, *Husserl and Transcendental Intersubjectivity* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2001), 2

41. Pivcevic, *Husserl and Phenomenology*, 46

42. Zahavi, *Husserl and Transcendental Intersubjectivity*, 11

43. Zahavi, *Husserl and Transcendental Intersubjectivity*, 9

44. Smith, *Routledge Philosophical Guidebook*, 20

45. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Book 1, ed. Fred Kersten, Trans Fred Kersten (The Hague: Springer, 1982), 355.

This, Husserl argues, is the only truly indisputable content, and having isolated it the process of phenomenological constitution can begin. Phenomenological constitution is the task of rigorously building up from this basic phenomenological residuum to the world as commonly experienced and known in everyday life, termed the life world.⁴⁶ Husserl refers to this as a transcendental phenomenological approach, using the term similar to Kant, because phenomenology abstracts from the world of ordinary experience in an attempt to discover and demonstrate the transcendental basis and condition that underlie that experience.

The project of transcendental constitution involves attempting to constitute the sense of various categories of experience, such as that of physical objects or time, from the individual perspective of transcendental subjectivity, the individual's subjective perspectives on the world cleansed of theory by epoche and the reduction. One of the major categories of experience that must be transcendently constituted in this process is the experience of the other human beings and their minds have been the problem of proving the existence of other minds.⁴⁷ This problem originated with Descartes who was led to it by his method of skepticism.⁴⁸ In general conversation, one says that, one sees people (with minds), however, one can only see the physical bodies of other people, as the mind is not a physical object. This leaves the question of how one can be sure of the existence of other minds.

For Edmund Husserl however, the problem of others takes a slightly different form; because if his project of phenomenological constitution is to go by, then his analysis must not only seek to explain how we can prove the existence of other minds, as well as justifying our belief in the factual existence of 'others' encountered in the life-world.⁴⁹ This problem has long been considered one of the most difficult questions of

46. Husserl, *Ideas*, 355

47. Smith, *Routledge Philosophical Guidebook*, 212

48. Soren Overgaard, *Wittgenstein and Other Minds: Rethinking Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity with Wittgenstein, Levinas and Husserl*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 1

49. Smith, *Routledge Philosophical Guidebook*, 213

Husserl's project due to the restrictions of transcendental phenomenology and the reduction.⁵⁰

Critics of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology often point to this issue as one where his transcendental method fails to provide a sufficient account of this basic category of experience, thus condemning the transcendental phenomenological perspective as doomed to 'solipsism' and hence insufficient as a rigorous basis for all further philosophy.⁵¹ However, it is important to add that, as robust as Husserl's method seems, it is also epistemologically insufficient to address the problem of other minds. This is because other minds problem comes in many shapes and forms such that Husserl's solution cannot do justice to the whole variety

Conclusion

Does the other mind exist? If yes, how can we know the other mind? Out of the various perspectives examined in this work, Husserl's approach seems most plausible. As far as Husserl is concerned, the solution to the problem of others is to demonstrate that it is possible to constitute the sense of another mind from within the reduction, this showing that the phenomenological account of this basic category of experience. That is, transcendental phenomenology must show that from the position of the reduced consciousness, termed by Husserl 'The transcendental ego', one can gain the sense of another transcendental ego', or subjectivity, and thus recognise one's place within a transcendental intersubjectivity. This is because as people evidently do have the concept of other minds, if transcendental phenomenology cannot provide such an account, then Husserl's core aim of providing a transcendental constitution of the life-world from the phenomenological residuum fails. Furthermore, assuming a phenomenological basis can be found, any account of the nature or origin of empathy is then relatively logically problematic, as it explains a phenomenal capacity that people both

50. Smith, *Routledge Philosophical Guidebook*, 215

51. Zahavi, *Husserl and Transcendental Intersubjectivity*, 18

evidently have, and for which there exist a phenomenological grounding.

It is worth mentioning that the significance of the constitution of other transcendental subjectivities is not simply in providing an account of people's capacity for empathy. Husserl considers intersubjectivity that is, a community of multiple subjectivities, to be the ground of other important categories, such as transcendence, objectivity and reality, and their counterparts: immanence, subjectivity and appearance. Thus, an account of empathy can ground intersubjectivity, by which other central elements of the life-world are grounded.

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