

## **Being Understood in Empathy: A Philosophical Model**

### **Abstract**

The feeling of being understood is an important aspect of human experience that contributes to well-being, agency, and interpersonal connection. Although psychological research increasingly recognizes it as a significant dimension of empathy, philosophical discussions of empathy have paid comparatively little attention to the target person's experience of feeling understood. Existing theories often explain empathy in terms of how an empathizer comes to understand another's mental states, leaving unclear how the target person's feeling of being understood arises and what role it plays within empathic interaction.

To address this issue, I draw on Gillespie and Cornish's (2010) framework of perspective comparison. Their account suggests that understanding emerges through the comparison of perspectives rather than through the accurate representation of another person's mental states. From this perspective, feeling understood arises when interlocutors engage in a reciprocal process of articulating, comparing, and revising their interpretations in relation to one another.

However, such a process presupposes certain epistemic conditions. Perspective comparison requires interlocutors to remain responsive to one another's interpretations while acknowledging the possibility that their own understanding may be incomplete or mistaken. I characterize this condition as reciprocal epistemic accountability.

Drawing on Bakhtinian accounts of dialogue, I argue that these epistemic conditions can be sustained only within a dialogic space. A dialogic space is a relational field in which meanings are jointly negotiated and remain open to revision. Rather than eliminating disagreement or uncertainty, such a space preserves them as conditions for inquiry and mutual understanding. Participants approach one another's perspectives without claiming complete access to them, and interpretive authority is continually negotiated rather than fixed.

Within this dialogic space, differences between interlocutors are neither erased nor overcome. Instead, they function as productive resources for empathic engagement. The possibility of misunderstanding remains present, yet interlocutors remain committed to examining and revising their interpretations in response to one another.

On this view, empathic understanding is not best conceived as the accurate grasp of another person's mental states. Rather, it is a co-constructed process through which interlocutors jointly clarify thoughts and feelings that may not yet be fully articulated. Consequently, the feeling of being understood is not merely an outcome of empathy but an integral component of empathic interaction itself.

## References

- Auger, E., Thai, S., Birnie-Porter, C., & Lydon, J. E. (2024). On Creating Deeper Relationship Bonds: Felt Understanding Enhances Relationship Identification. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 51(11), 2248-2265. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672241233419> (Original work published 2025)
- Bailey, O. (2022). Empathy and the value of humane understanding. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 104(1), 50-65.
- Barlassina, Luca and Robert M. Gordon, "Folk Psychology as Mental Simulation", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/folkpsych-simulation/>.
- Boisserie-Lacroix, C., & Inchingolo, M. (2021). Empathy for a reason? From understanding agency to phenomenal insight. *Synthese*, 198(8), 7097-7118.
- Camus, A., & Gilbert, S. (1946). *The stranger*. A.A. Knopf.
- De Jaegher, Hanne ; Di Paolo, Ezequiel & Gallagher, Shaun (2010). Can social interaction constitute social cognition? *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 14 (10):441-447.
- de Vignemont, Fred' erique and Pierre Jacob. (2012). "What is it like to feel another's pain?" *Philosophy of Science* 79(2):295–316
- Gallagher, S. (2008). Direct perception in the intersubjective context. *Consciousness and cognition*, 17(2), 535-543.
- Gallagher, S. (2012). Empathy, simulation, and narrative. *Science in context*, 25(3), 355-381.
- Gallese, V., & Goldman, A. I. (1998). Mirror neurons and the simulation theory of mind-reading. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 2(12), 493–501.
- Gallese, Vittorio. (2001). The 'shared manifold' hypothesis: From mirror neurons to empathy. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8:33–50.
- Gallotti, Mattia & Frith, Chris D. (2013). Social cognition in the we-mode. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 17 (4):160-165.
- Gillespie, A., & Cornish, F. (2010). Intersubjectivity: Towards a dialogical analysis. *Journal for the theory of social behaviour*, 40(1), 19-46.
- Goldman, A. I. (2006). *Simulating minds: The philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience of mindreading*. Oxford University Press.
- Goldman, A. I. (2009). Mirroring, simulating and mindreading. *Mind & Language*, 24(2), 235-252.
- Grimm, Stephen, "Understanding", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2024 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2024/entries/understanding/>.
- Hawes, L. C. (1999). The dialogics of conversation: Power, control, vulnerability. *Communication Theory*, 9(3), 229-264.
- Hollan, D. (2008). Being There: On the Imaginative Aspects of Understanding Others and Being Understood. *Ethos*, 36(4), 475–489. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20486593>
- Hutto, D. D., & Jurgens, A. (2018). Exploring enactive empathy: actively responding to and understanding others. In *Philosophical Perspectives on Empathy* (pp. 111-128). Routledge.
- Laing, R. D., Phillipson, H., & Lee, A. R. 1966. *Interpersonal Perception: A Theory and Method of Research*. London: Tavistock Publications.

- Livingstone, A. G. (2023). Felt understanding in intergroup relations. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 51, 101587.
- Maibom, H. L. (2017). Affective empathy. In *The Routledge handbook of philosophy of empathy* (pp. 22-32). Routledge.
- Maibom, H. L. (2022). *The space between: How Empathy really works*. Oxford University Press.
- Nortvedt, P. (2017). Empathy and medical therapy. In *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy* (pp. 273-282). Routledge.
- Oishi, S., Krochik, M., & Akimoto, S. (2010). Felt understanding as a bridge between close relationships and subjective well-being: Antecedents and consequences across individuals and cultures. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 4(6), 403-416.
- Petrashka, T., & Werner, C. (2023). Empathic Understanding: Historical and Recent Perspectives on Empathy's Role in Social Cognition and Aesthetics. *Empathy's Role in Understanding Persons, Literature, and Art*, 1-22.
- Ratcliffe, M. (2017). Empathy without simulation. In *Imagination and social perspectives* (pp. 199-220). Routledge.
- Reis HT, Lemay Jr. EP, Finkenauer C. Toward understanding understanding: The importance of feeling understood in relationships. *Soc Personal Psychol Compass*. 2017; 11:e12308. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12308>
- Rossignac-Milon, M., Bolger, N., Zee, K. S., Boothby, E. J., & Higgins, E. T. (2021). Merged minds: Generalized shared reality in dyadic relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 120(4), 882–911. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000266>
- Scarantino, Andrea and Ronald de Sousa, "Emotion", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/emotion/>.
- Spaulding, S. (2017). Cognitive empathy. In *The Routledge handbook of philosophy of empathy* (pp. 13-21). Routledge.
- Stueber, K. (2006). *Rediscovering empathy: Agency, folk psychology, and the human sciences*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Stueber, K. (2012). Varieties of empathy, neuroscience and the narrativist challenge to the contemporary theory of mind debate. *Emotion Review*, 4(1), 55-63.
- Stueber, Karsten, "Empathy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/empathy/>.
- Stueber, K. R. (2024). Empathy and Sympathy. In *Emotion Theory: The Routledge Comprehensive Guide* (pp. 125-140). Routledge.
- Tavares, R. M., Mendelsohn, A., Grossman, Y., Williams, C. H., Shapiro, M., Trope, Y., & Schiller, D. (2015). A map for social navigation in the human brain. *Neuron*, 87(1), 231-243. DOI: 10.1016/j.neuron.2015.06.011
- Wang, Y. A., & Todd, A. R. (2021). Evaluations of empathizers depend on the target of empathy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 121(5), 1005–1028. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000341>
- Werner, C. (2023). Concurring Emotions, Affective Empathy, and Phenomenal Understanding. *Passion: Journal of the European Philosophical Society for the Study of Emotions*, 1(2), 108-124.

Werner, C. (2025). On Mary's colour perception and soldiers at war—the knowledge we gain from complex experiences. In *Imagination and Experience* (pp. 198-214). Routledge.