The Contribution of the Other in Radical Empathy

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1. Introduction

We live in a time in which diversity and understanding each other's differences are considered highly valued ideals. An increasing amount of research is, therefore, focused on the understanding of varying experiences of people with differing backgrounds. One such study, within psychiatry, is Matthew Ratcliffe's account on radical empathy. Radical empathy refers to an immersive way of understanding another person's experience by recognising and being affected by their unique existential world, rather than merely interpreting their thoughts and emotions from an external perspective. Radical empathy leads to better interpretations of experiential reports, that way fostering connection, feelings of which are often already diminished for many mental health clients.

Reading Ratcliffe's paper, one might question if and how such an empathic achievement, where one transcends one's own existential world, is possible. Especially from a traditional perspective, where empathy is explained in terms of a cognitive mechanism where one simulates a feeling internally to predict what the other must be feeling based on their behavior, it makes sense to question how Ratcliffe's phenomenological description, that goes beyond pure simulation, is realized mechanistically.

Grounded in physicalism, simulation approaches tackle the problem of a metaphysical divide between experiential lives of separate subjects, due to the physicalist assumption that conscious experiences arise from, and are localized to, physically separated brains. A simulation mechanism is thus understood as a way to bridge this gap epistemologically. This metaphysical gap is, however, not reflected in Ratcliffe's phenomenological account on empathy. Because Ratcliffe's account is not concerned with, or committed to, any metaphysical position, it allows for a mechanistic explanation with any compatible ontology, thereby opening the door to alternative explanations that might fit the phenomenological description better on a metaphysical level. In this paper I therefore aim to explore the following research question: how could Ratcliffe's phenomenological description of radical empathy be explained from an alternative metaphysical perspective where no fundamental gap between experiential fields

exist, and what could be a possible mechanism underlying the self-affective aspect of radical empathy given this framework?

In the first two sections, I will examine Ratcliffe's concept of radical empathy in more detail and identify the exact description that I want to explain using the alternative metaphysical framework. In the third section, I will introduce Itay Shani's metaphysical framework of cosmopsychism and suggest a mechanistic description of perception that can be understood as self-affecting. In the final section I will argue that this process can get replicated during interpersonal interaction, such that subject dependent perceptions can become available for empathetic reflection to the other.

2. Ratcliffe's concept of Radical Empathy

In his paper *Phenomenology as a Form of Empathy,* Ratcliffe explores several key ideas. First, he examines the concept of empathy as simulation, a prominent view within philosophy of mind, which holds that empathy relies on an internal mechanism of simulating thoughts and feelings of others. The implication of such an indirect approach is, however, that we never experience the feeling of another, instead we experience our own feeling and attribute it to the other (Ratcliffe 2012, 475). Merely constructing an experience within the context of our own subjective world raises doubts about whether it truly allows us to understand others' experiences. A complete account of empathy must, therefore, offer more.

Subsequently, Ratcliffe focuses on accounts of empathy within the phenomenological tradition, particularly those of Stein (1989) and Zahavi (2007). They conceive empathy as direct perception, in which we recognize others' behavior directly as an expression of their mind. Perceiving others' experiences, however, only informs us *that* they have a certain feeling or emotion; it does not include an understanding of *why* they feel this way, which is a crucial part of empathy (Ratcliffe 2012, 476). Merely perceiving others' experience is thus, as an account of empathy, not sufficient either.

Concluding his exploration of different existing accounts of empathy, Ratcliffe arrives at a hybrid approach, where empathy, on the one hand, relies on conscious or unconscious simulation, and on the other hand also includes an appreciation of the role of the other in the simulated experience (Ratcliffe 2012, 477). This appreciation of the role of the other is a key idea that Ratcliffe takes from the phenomenological accounts. He reasons as follows: "that x [the person who tries to understand] is involved in process y [the simulated feeling] does not

imply that x is responsible for those features that make y distinctive" (Ratcliffe 2012, 476; emphasis mine). It is not entirely clear what Ratcliffe here means by being "responsible" for the distinctive features of a simulated feeling. Therefore, what this responsibility entails will be part of our explanandum.

A significant part of the paper Ratcliffe devotes to explaining the radical part of his account. What it comes down to, is that we should recognise that the experiences of others can be structured in radically different ways, such that their whole world appears differently. Especially people suffering from psychological disorders can have a diminished sense of reality and possibility, leading to a dramatically altered existential world that shapes each experience in a way according to these background feelings. This underlying structure, shaping the *kind* of experiences we have, is what Ratcliffe refers to with 'modal space' (Ratcliffe 2012, 483).

The idea of radical empathy is that; just like we can temporarily suspend or bracket our own circumstances or cultural norms in order to empathise with someone with a different background (culture, age group, etc.), we should also aim to suspend or bracket our own existential world that determines the quality of our own experiences, in order to empathize with someone who's existential world is drastically altered.

3. The Self-Affecting Aspect of Radical Empathy

In the final section of his paper, Ratcliffe responds to a possible critique on his account of radical empathy, namely that one could say that such an achievement of empathy, where we could understand a person with a fundamentally different modal space, is simply impossible, because we cannot escape our own modal space (Ratcliffe 2012, 487). In response Ratcliffe emphasizes that radical empathy is self-affecting. The fact that radical empathy can include a perceptual aspect, like the phenomenological accounts mentioned in the beginning, makes it different from "imaginative reconstruction" (Ratcliffe 2012, 488). This emphasis, in response to the skepticism, suggests that the perceptional and self-affecting aspect of radical empathy enables an understanding that empathy as pure simulation cannot provide.

Ratcliffe then illustrates the process of self-affection with several examples of interpersonal interaction, that in general has the quality of being self-affecting. Self-affecting means that your experience is shaped by the other person. "It does not involve replicating the patient's experience. Instead, interaction with the person makes one feel a certain way, and that first-person feeling is at the same time a presentation of his experience" (Ratcliffe 2012, 489).

Self-affection thus involves an experience arising in oneself, but one that says something about the other person's inner experience. We see here the same process described that we have earlier identified as our explanandum, the participation of the other in the differing aspects of an experience arising in empathic engagement. In another example Ratcliffe adds that the "interaction reshapes your experience of the world. You do not simply understand the child's experience; you are affected by it" (Ratcliffe 2012, 489). This special kind of experience thus not only says something about the other's experience, but also transforms your own world and quality of experience.

A question that can arise is: is self-affection a necessary aspect for radical empathy? And does self-affection always involve direct perception? Ratcliffe writes that radical empathy *can* have a perceptual aspect to it, implying that, in principle, perception is not necessary for radical empathy (Ratcliffe 2012, 488). Furthermore, he also mentions cases of radical empathy employed towards written reports and even imaginary characters, cases that do not involve direct perception (Ratcliffe 2012, 488). Does this mean that these instances of radical empathy do not involve self-affection, or do they involve self-affection without direct perception?

As Ratcliffe does not provide more clarity on this issue, within this paper, I will assume for now that self-affection does always involve perception, but that radical empathy does not always involve self-affection. Consequently, above non-perceptual cases must be explained without relying on self-affection, for example as sophisticated instances of simulation where one takes into account a different modal space when engaging in imagination. Such an explanation, however, undermines the relevance of the self-affecting aspect in radical empathy. This could pose a problem for the assumption that self-affection always involves direct perception. I will leave this issue aside and focus, for now, on the question of how the self-affective mechanism that underlies most instances of radical empathy could be described and how the participation of the other in the transformation of experience could work.

4. Experience as Interference Patterns

In this section I will first briefly explain Shani's cosmophysism as he introduces it in his paper *Cosmopsychism: A Holistic Approach to the Metaphysics of Experience* (2015). Building on this I will then propose a description of perception involving interference patterns and argue that perceiving in this definition can be understood as being affected. In the section following this one, I will finally describe how such a self-affecting process can enable the other to causally

contribute to my experience, adding features to my experience which resemble the experience of the other.

4.1 An ocean of Consciousness with Waves, Ripples and Whirlpools

In Shani's cosmopsychism the ultimate reduction ground of reality, including all seemingly separate subjective lives, is "a vast, dynamically fluctuating, ocean (or field)" of "cosmic consciousness" (Shani 2015, 389-390 and 411). It is the fabric where all of life and non-living things are made of. They are local disturbances of the field that can be likened to currents, waves, whirlpools, bubbles and ripples coursing the ocean (Shani 2015, 414). What we perceive as physical objects are quasi-stable patterns that arise from the interferences of "waves" and "currents" forming new semi-independent patterns or "configurations" (Shani 2015, 411 and 414).

The absolute field of consciousness has a pervasive experiential quality to it, though unstructured and not yet unified into a singular subjective perspective. In some stable configurations, though, like animals and humans, which would be like whirlpools in the above metaphor, consciousness centralises into one point due to the specific and complex structure of their configuration. This leads to a unification of consciousness, giving rise to a unique perspective of subjective experience (Shani 2015, 418). Because the unified consciousness becomes occupied with the stable configuration that sustains its unification, the illusion arises of a separate self and a separate experiential field. However, just like the water constituting a whirlpool is still part of the whole ocean, so are all the different unified centers of consciousness with their seemingly separated fields of experience still interconnected and part of the whole absolute field of consciousness (Shani 2015, 418).

4.2 Perception as Being Affected

To explain the self-affective aspect of radical empathy that involves perception, we first need to explain what perception would be given this ontological framework. Shani does not explain explicitly how perception exactly arises, however, he does clarify that "local interference patterns are discerned as phenomenal states" (Shani 2015, 413). He seems to suggest that phenomenal states, or subjective experiences, among which perceptions, involve local interference patterns. I want to add to this that experiences are fleeting, so these must be fleeting local interference patterns. What could fleeting local interference patterns be within this framework?

We can imagine that the structure of quasi-stable configurations, which are active interference patterns themselves, slightly and temporarily change as a whole due to external forces (this is logical because their structure is created and sustained by interference in the first place). The change, the temporary difference in the whole pattern, is itself an interference that, in isolation, would have its own unique pattern. This temporary change could therefore be understood as a local and fleeting interference pattern. This interpretation of local interference patterns could explain perception in terms of interference. Imagine, for example, going back to the metaphor, an active whirlpool (W1) causing ripples radiating from itself and traveling outwards throughout the ocean. These ripples, signifying the causal powers of the whirlpool, interfere with other configurations. Accordingly, when a ripple of W1 reaches another configuration, possibly another human "whirlpool" (W2), this interference causes a slight structural change to the whole configuration of W2. Subsequently this change becomes accessible for the unified consciousness sustained by that configuration. In other words, a local fleeting interference pattern arises as part of W2 and as a phenomenal state for the unified consciousness of W2: W2 now perceives W1.

This description of perception lends itself very fitting to be described as self-affecting: the *self,* the configuration itself, is slightly altered, or affected, during perception. For example, when we sit outside and feel the warmth of the sun on our skin, our self, the stable configuration that defines the "boundaries" of our experiential field, is interfered upon, or affected by, the sun. The "ripples" radiating from the sun are subtle enough not to damage us, as a pattern, permanently, at least not immediately, but strong enough to interfere with our structure, change us as a pattern, such that our consciousness notices. The same idea can be applied to perceiving another person, or being affected by another person, the difference being that the "ripples" that cause the interference are radiated by a configuration that has a unified consciousness itself.

5. Replicated interference patterns

Perception alone does not yet amount to empathy. Perception supposedly does help us learn something about the thing being perceived. We can imagine that we are directly exposed to the structure of another configuration when its "ripples" interfere upon us, because these "ripples" are, in a way, an extension of that configuration. However, even if we get to know the structure of another quasi-stable configuration, we still have no access to the fleeting interference patterns that arise locally as part of that configuration. Empathy is about understanding the

experience of another, and should therefore include not only an appreciation of their structure but also of their local fleeting interference patterns, their experiences.

There is a way, however, to imagine how two configurations with a unified consciousness can gain fleeting interference patterns that depend on the structure of the other, but within their own experiential field. We can imagine that when person (*P*) and person (*P'*) interact with each other, situated within a shared world of objects (*O*), for each person multiple fleeting interference patterns arise, or more precisely their whole pattern changes slightly, according to the sum total of its original structure and all influences (*P* + *extended P'* + *extended O*). This means that within the total structure of one person are, at that moment, embedded the following interference patterns:

(1) *P* x *extended P'*,

(2) *P* x *extended O* and

(3) extended P' x extended O,

where 'x' stands for interference.

The last one resembles, however diluted, an interference pattern that is also part of the other person, namely **(4)** *P'* x *extended O*, which is the experience of the other person of the shared world.

Take for example a simplified world with three configurations: Ratcliffe, a child and a book (based on Ratcliffe's example of reading a bedtime story to a child (Ratcliffe 2012, 288). If Ratcliffe is interacting with the child by reading them a book, his experience is affected both by the child and the book. The "ripples" radiating from the book and the "ripples" radiating from the child meet his configuration and *each other's* extended configuration, all within the boundaries of Ratcliffe's experiential field. If Ratcliffe were then to subtract, in his imagination, his own contribution as a quasi-stable configuration to the sum total of the pattern including all fleeting interference patterns, what would be left is an interference pattern of the child's "extended configuration" and that of the book. Technically, this pattern is Ratcliffe and shaping his experience, because it happens as part of his experiential field. However, because it involves the extended configuration of the child and the book (which the child is also perceiving in that moment), it resembles the interference pattern that is part of the child's experiential field.

Ratcliffe has, therefore, in theory, access to a replication of the child's experience, which is embedded in and shaping Ratcliffe's whole experience.

We can now connect this example back to Ratcliffe's description of a crucial component of empathy: the responsibility of the other for the differing features of an experience. The differing features, the replication, is causally contributed by the child to his experience, the sum total of the interference pattern happening as part of him. If he is engaging in empathy and pays attention to which features of his experience are different while he interacts with the child, effectively subtracting or suspending his own contribution, he can see which parts the child is causally responsible for. Of course, it remains a question how this suspension of your own contribution to an experience is practically executed.

When a person's structure is so radically different from ours, and consequently their modal space is so modified that their whole existential world appears differently, just imagining how experience would be like for them would not be effective enough, because the interference patterns we would imagine would still be based on our own configuration and model space. I argue that with the above ontological backdrop, radical empathy can be interpreted as relying on the mechanism of interference, specifically a replication of interference patterns, which enables us to access structures foreign to us and pick up on differences in experience that can differ in radical ways from our ordinary experience.

6. Conclusion

Ratcliffe's concept of radical empathy is a hybrid approach to empathy that includes both imagination and an appreciation of the role of the other in the differing features of an altered experience when engaging in empathy. In this paper I have argued that the latter part is what makes radical empathy different, because it exposes us to the modal structure of the other which is inaccessible by imagination alone.

Within cosmopsychism, as introduced by Shani, experiences can be understood as local fleeting interference patterns arising as part of quasi-stable configurations with unified consciousness. I proposed that these interference patterns are caused by "ripples" radiating from all kinds of configurations coursing the absolute field of consciousness. I argued further that being interfered upon as a configuration, captures the essence of being affected, leading me to the conclusion that a possible mechanism of the self-affecting aspect in perception and empathy could be such interference.

Finally, I have defined the role of the other in the altered experience, as a causal contribution to the sum total of the fleeting interference patterns that arise within the experiential field of the person interacting with them. When this person, engaging in empathy, would subtract, in imagination, from their experience their own structural contribution, what would remain would be the unfamiliar parts of the experience constituted by the other and resembling the experience that happens within them. This subtraction could be understood as suspending our own existential world and modal space, which is what would transform mundane empathy into radical empathy.

7. References

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