
Theodore Lipps, Aesthetic Empathy, and the Self-Other Problem

DOUGLAS CHISMAR

Like Marx's "spectre haunting Europe," the Cartesian self continues to haunt Western philosophy and, increasingly, global culture, awakening efforts to challenge its exaggerated subject/object dualism. As long recognised in the Asian philosophical tradition, the Cartesian self can be attacked from two sides: in terms of its failure to recognize the deeper ontological unities which transcend self and other (as noted, for example, in the Vedantic tradition), and in reference to the "ontological fissures" which open up when the concept of the ego is carefully studied (as observed specially by the Buddhists).

A different angle of criticism comes from aestheticians, who have often held that there is a kind of "overcoming" of the subject/object chasm in the experience of art. A particularly intriguing, and largely overlooked form of this argument is offered by Theodore Lipps, a turn of the century German cognitive psychologist and philosopher. Lipps is perhaps best known for bringing into popular parlance the term "empathy" (*Einfühlung*). His theory of aesthetics, that all aesthetic perception involves an empathizing or "in-feeling" of the aesthetic object has been roundly criticised as both too weak and too strong. Lipps even earned perhaps the greatest mark of distinction, or disgrace, for any philosopher when a logical fallacy was designated to identify his alleged fundamental error. He is held to have committed the "pathetic fallacy," viz., the fallacy of attributing animate feelings, qualities or powers to inanimate objects. As a result of these and other criticisms, few of his writings have even been translated from the original German. I wish, nonetheless, to suggest that Lipps brings to our attention an intriguing phenomenon which has value for those who seek to counter and rethink Cartesian dualism. It is especially of interest to re-read him now, in light of the many angles of attack on the self-other problem which have originated since the turn of the century.

Taken as a definition by which to characterize all aesthetic experience, Lipps' approach is readily defeated by the clever counter example. It is a misreading, however, to classify him simply as yet another in the long line of those who attempted to supply necessary and sufficient conditions for the aesthetic. Overlooked in the rush to judgement and criticism is the phenomenon Lipps sought to carefully clarify, viz., the experience of aesthetic empathy. As described

by Lipps, this experience offers an important bridge between the self, that creation of uniquely modern life, thinking and being and the seemingly all too distant other. Like Tolstoy and others, Lipps asserts that it is through the vehicle of the work of art, as an occasion for empathy, that a healing of the self-other relation can occur.

But art can find and help us to feel what is human in all that, the positively human vitality, strength, power of volition, work, in short, activity. And all of this can find an echo in us and can satisfy a yearning in us. For all the yearning we feel can be comprised in one word: it is the yearning to live (EAP, 412).¹

Lipps' Concept of the Empathic Process

Lipps begins (EAP, 403) by distinguishing three types or directions of enjoyment. (1) "I enjoy a thing or a sensuous object distinct from myself, (2) "I enjoy myself, for example, my power or my skill". These first two forms exhibit the subject/object structure in which modern humans find themselves entangled. However, Lipps adds a third form of enjoyment, (3) "I enjoy myself in a sensuous object distinct from myself" (what he refers to as "objectivated self-enjoyment"). This third form of enjoyment occurs through empathy: "empathy means, not a sensation in one's body, but feeling something, namely, oneself, into the esthetic object" (EIS, 381).

Lipps' theory of "empathic projection" is built around the concept of life as "activity" (*Aktivitat*). Lipps begins by expressing a form of the German romantic view of life as *Streben*—striving, meeting resistance, throwing oneself against and immersing oneself in the obstacle :

What I empathize is, in the most general sense, life itself. And life is power, inner working, striving, achieving. In one word, life is activity : free or inhibited, easy or arduous, at one with itself or in inner conflict, tense or relaxed, concentrated in a point or scattered and 'losing itself' in manifold vital activity (EAP, 404).

Empathy, in turn, is initiated by an often involuntary, natural or instinctual inner imitation of the observed vital activity of another. For example, I see another person extend and hold out their arm; it becomes an object of my concentrated attention.

Now I again feel a striving. Possibly I realize this striving. I imitate the movements. In doing so I feel active. I feel the effort, the resistance to obstacles, the act of overcoming, the joy of succeeding. I feel all this actually. I do not merely imagine things of this sort (EIS, 378).

I can empathize (with) other people (e.g., I inwardly strain along with the acrobat or dancer), with animals, and even with inanimate objects and structures (e.g., I

empathize with the column holding up weight, or with the concert hall stretching out its cavernous space). Most importantly for our purposes, I empathize with the work of art, a human creation whose formal qualities evoke in me a vicarious action tendency which draws me out of myself and into the artist's production.

Though I can actively seek to imitate what I observe in the object or other, the most genuine form of empathy is the nonvoluntary kind. This empathizing is, at its roots, a physiological (or as Lipps calls it, a "kinesthetic") phenomenon. Here Lipps appears to have been influenced by the James-Lange approach which construed emotion as a subjective awareness of felt physiological tensions or changes. As such, what is felt in empathy is both physically-based, and dynamic or action-oriented—a kind of physical participation in the vital activity of the other.

While empathy produces a kind of "physical mimicry" in me, the spectator, its intentional focus does not remain on my body. "Empathy means, not a sensation in one's body, by feeling something, namely oneself, into the esthetic object" (EHS, 381). The more I give myself to contemplating the seen movement, the more involuntary and, in sense, selfless, is the movement which I experience in myself.

In a word, I am now with my feeling of activity entirely and wholly in the moving figure. Even spatially, if we can speak of the spatial extent of the ego, I am in its place. I am transported into it. I am, so far as my consciousness is concerned, entirely and wholly identical with it. Thus feeling myself active in the observed human figure, I feel also in it free, facile, proud. This is esthetic imitation and this imitation is at the same time esthetic empathy (EHS, 379).

This leads Lipps to an admittedly paradoxical relation between the aesthetic object and the self which contemplates it. On the other hand, "the sensuous appearance of the beautiful thing is certainly the object of esthetic enjoyment, but just as certainly it is not the ground of it. Rather the cause of esthetic enjoyment is myself, or the ego; exactly the same ego that feels joyous or pleased 'in view' of the object or 'opposite' it" (EHS, 375). On the other hand, I have these feelings not in myself, but in the object. Empathy is not a feeling "related to an object," The object of aesthetic experience, and also its ground, is the ego, but only insofar as it is "bound up with the sensuously perceived figure" (EHS, 376). In aesthetic imitation, "I become progressively less aware of muscular tensions or sense- feelings in general the more I surrender in contemplation to the esthetic object" (EHS, 380).

Empathy is the fact here established that the object is myself and by the very same token this self of mine is the object. Empathy is the fact

that the antithesis between myself and the object disappears, or rather does not yet exist (EIS, 376).

Lipps goes out of his way to stress the "identity" between self and object in esthetic empathy : "in esthetic imitation this opposition is absolutely done away with. The two are simply one" (EIS, 379).

Lipps Criticized

This claim of "identity" opened up the door to a variety of criticisms. Gilbert and Kuhn, in their *History of Aesthetics*, claim that Lipps is expressing little more here than a kind of German romantic mysticism or "magical idealism" (Novalis) in which the self is absorbed into its object of devotion.² That is, given the history of German romanticism, Lipps is only imparting scientific contours to a phenomenon long known and described. I would propose, however, that Lipps brings the phenomenon to a new kind of clarity through his introduction of the concept of "empathy." Though one finds illustrations of empathizing, one does not find the kind of detailed description of the process in earlier writings in the German aesthetic tradition.

More specific criticisms come from opposite standpoints. Edith Stein, in her important study, *On the Problem of Empathy*, singles out Lipps's theory as an example of the confusion of sympathy with "identification". On Lipps's view of the identity of the felt and the *eingefühlt*, what is occurring in my body and in the foreign body "would then remain completely obscure, since I am living 'in' the one in the same way as in the other".³ Lipps overlooks the distinction between one's own "primordial" experience and the non-primordial experience of the other.

I am not one with the acrobat, but only 'at' him. I do not actually go through his motions but *quasi*. Lipps also stresses, to be sure, that I do not outwardly go through his motions. But neither is what 'inwardly' corresponds to the movement of the body, the experience that 'I move,' primordial; it is non-primordial; it is non-primordial for me. And in these non-primordial movements I feel led, accompanied by his movements... What has led Lipps astray in his description was the confusion of self-forgetfulness, through which I can surrender myself to any object, with a dissolution of the 'I' in the object. Thus, strictly speaking, empathy is not a feeling of oneness.⁴

Lipps thus pays insufficient heed to the different between self and other.

A criticism from the opposite side comes from Max Scheler in *The Nature of Sympathy*. Scheler attacks Lipps for fostering an "analogical" view of the other's personhood which fails to bridge the gap between self and other. Employing empathy to understand the other's experience is an unnecessarily

circuitous route to their personhood, something which must be presupposed were empathy to function at all.

That we cannot be aware of an experience (of another) without being aware of a self is something which is directly based upon the intuitable intrinsic connection between individual and experience; there is no need of empathy on the part of the percipient.⁵

Lipps has thus been criticized for forgetting the self-other distinction and for exaggerating it. It will not be easy for him to please his critics.⁶

Lipps defended

Lipps might be criticized for reinforcing the subject/object dichotomy if he maintained that it is empathy which first brings a pre-existing independent self into contact with its separately existing object. Unfortunately, he does sometimes give this impression, for example when describing a kind of "humanistic appreciation" of the other which arises from the empathic experience. These humanistic consequences of empathy are articulated when Lipps tackles the problem of how we can derive aesthetic enjoyment from the represented despair or suffering of others. He proposes that to experience the inner depths of another, even in despair "is an experiencing of some whole personality with its woe and despair, with its whole power and inner activity, with its effort and exertion" (EAP, 411). Enjoyment comes as an "echo of this human being in me, an inner yea-saying to this being" (EAP, 411). Even in another's suffering, I experience "the concealed gold of humanity" (EAP, 411). "It allows me to experience and to feel the essentially human even in the dreadful...I see what is at bottom positive in it" (EAP, 412).

None of this precludes an initial (pre-empathic) openness or directedness to the personhood of the other. Empathy need not provide "the first ontological bridge from one's own subject, which is given proximally and alone, to the other subject, which is proximally quite closed off" (Heidegger).⁷ Recall that Lipps declares, "empathy is the fact that the antithesis between myself and the object disappears, *or rather does not yet exist*" (EHS, 376, italics mine). Lipps dodges the question of what interests us in the empathized object in the first place, referring this to an instinctually-mediated process conducted below the threshold of consciousness.⁸ Like both Scheler and Heidegger, Lipps allows for the possibility of a "disguisedness" of this directedness to the other due to the prevalence of the Cartesian conception of self and object. Empathy would then serve the humanistic purpose described above, revealing the "concealed gold of humanity" through what at first (falsely) appear to be mere material objects.⁹ That empathy effectively addresses a kind of false objectification of the other does not imply

that it does not, itself, rely upon a prior (but perhaps forgotten) orientation towards others.

Regarding the charge that Lipps' empathy amounts to a kind of identification, careful reading of Lipps reveals that he seeks to preserve some type of distinction between self and object after all. He notes, for example, that in an unimitative act, the "real" self acts, i.e., "my total personality as it is actually disposed at the time." In aesthetic imitation, "quite differently, the self is an ideal one" (EIS, 379). Lipps acknowledges the difficulty with this adjective, hedging as follows: "This ideal' self, too is real. But it is not the real 'practical' self. It is the contemplative self, lingering and merged in the contemplation of the object" (EIS, 379).¹⁰ Lipps is eager to make clear that the self remains capable of distinguishing the difference between "reality" and "the aesthetic", and between "self" and "other", which would not be the case in true identification. He argues repeatedly that in aesthetic experience, I am aware that it is with a *represented* object that I empathize; I thus "remove it to an ideal realm" (EAP, 412) which has no power to move me to "practical action."

This appeal to the ideal/real distinction is probably ill-advised. If my real self is unaffected by art, this seems to take away from the claim that "I am completely and wholly carried away from this sphere of my experience" (EIS, 380). Surely the physiological imitative processes and action tendencies provoked by empathy are "real" as well, even if they don't prompt the physical actions which would fulfill them.

Perhaps Lipps' view can be better understood if it is seen as combining a strongly physiological process of involuntary, instinctual imitation with a Kantian/Husserlian notion of the individual as actively constituting and constructing his/her world.

Everything, therefore, which exists as some particular thing—and other objects simply do not exist for me—is necessarily and self-evidently permeated by my life. This then is the commonest signification of 'empathy.' It means that when I grasp an object, as it exists and indeed must exist for me, I experience an activity or kind of self-activity as an attribute of the object (EAP, 407).

This begins to sound very much like Lipps has fallen after all into the solipsistic trap Husserl tried so hard to escape. "The sensuous appearance of a person is for me pleasant or unpleasant, beautiful or ugly, because first of all in it there is a kind of life—an evocation of my own experience, and experience of my self, an activity of the inner being" (EAP 410). Yet "in seeing care, anxiety, despair, I see a person who feels these things in himself, and when I see him or experience him, *he introjects himself into my experience*. Artistic depiction

has evoked an experience of him" (EAP, 410, my italics). In line with the traditional notion of aesthetic judgement as "disinterested," Lipps proposes that this is the virtue of aesthetic empathy, that it "leads me and forces me, the observer, to step out of and beyond myself" (EAP, 412).

Lipps' paradigm, then, appears to revolve around a form of physiological activation, aroused as I relentlessly search out my environment, which yields a subjective experience. The more purely aesthetic the encounter, the more the international focus of this experience is drawn powerfully to the other. Simultaneous with this, a lingering awareness that the experience is an aesthetic one is generated by the felt action of "representing," projecting one's kinesthetic experience back onto the object. In a paradoxical manner, the "ideal" self, dwelling in what is known to be a representation (perhaps through the feeling of being "led" described by Stein), also experiences "real" physiological responses and action-inclinations, which, however, are not acted upon. One lives imaginatively in the object, not by the deliberate exercise of imagination, but rather riding upon the energy of the nonvoluntary responses initiated by the aesthetic object. An inherent orientedness towards the other explains the origin of these responses, and also directs the international focus of these sensations continually back upon the object. "What I empathize...is life and activity, or a mode of my self-activity" (EAP, 404).

This playful alternation between self and other, physical and mental, passive and active, ideal and real, constituted and "led" is, as Lipps maintains, little more than the "yearning to live", a yearning which, can never be realized within the boundaries of a Cartesian self. In empathy, objects and others are rescued from the "objective" status impact by a modern Cartesian way of thinking. For that reason aesthetic empathy, and Lipps' detailed study of it, is a phenomenon which deserves to be reconsidered and studied anew.

Notes and References

1. Lipps citations in this article are derived from two Lipps articles : "Empathy and Aesthetic Pleasure", *Die Zukunft* 54 (1905), translated by Karl Aschenbrenner and reprinted in *Aesthetic Theories*, ed. by Karl Aschenbrenner, Arnold Isenberg (Prentice-Hall, 1965); 403-412 [hereafter, EAP]; "Empathy, Inner Imitation, and Sense-Feelings." *Archiv fur die gesamte Psychologie* 1 (1903), reprinted in *A Modern Book of Esthetics*, ed. Melvin Rader (Hold, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), 374-382 [hereafter, EHS].
2. Katherine Everett Gilbert, Helmut Kuhn. *A History of Esthetics* (Macmillan, 1939), 540.
3. Edith Stein. *On the Problem of Empathy*. translated by Waltraut Stein. Volume III: The Collected Works of Edith Stein (ICS Publications, 1989). 16.
4. *Ibid.*, 17
5. See Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, translated by Peter Heath (Archon Books, 1973), 10. In a sense, Scheler criticizes Lipps from both directions. He claims to discover in Lipps an analogical theory for the knowledge of others, yet also attacks Lipps for confusing the "real" self with the perceived other. The latter occurs, though, because, on the alleged analogical process, the perceiver's own experience is dredged up by empathic imitation, at which point it becomes

- difficult to distinguish the "real" self from the other. Scheler is quite concerned about any loss of self in empathic experience, fearing that it leads to kind "emotional infection" or mob behavior. That Scheler himself continues to struggle with the influences of Cartesianism is illustrated by the followings: "That is why we can also have it given to us that the other has an individual self distinct from our own, and that we can never fully comprehend this individual self, steeped as it is in own psychic experience, but only our own view of it as an individual, conditioned as this is by our own individual nature. It is a corollary of this that the other person has—like ourselves—a sphere of absolute personal privacy, which can never be given to us. But that 'experiences' occur there is given for us in expressive phenomena—again, not by inference, but directly, as a sort of primary 'perception'" (10)
6. Scheler appears to derive from his critique of Lipps a surprisingly Cartesian conclusion: "That is why we can also have it given to us that the other has an individual self distinct from our own, and that we can never fully comprehend this individual self, steeped as it is in its own psychic experience, but only our own view of it as an individual, conditioned as this is by our own individual nature. It is a corollary of this that the other person has—like ourselves—a sphere of absolute personal privacy, which can never be given to us (10).
 7. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Harper & Row, 1962), 162. "Empathy" does not first constitute Being-with; only on the basis of Being-with does 'empathy' become possible: it gets its motivation from the unsociability of the dominant modes of Being-with" (*ibid.*, 162).
 8. "Whenever I see a 'laughing face', whenever I see just these spatial changes in a face, I experience a stimulus to grasp them. But remarkably, this stimulus is a stimulus that produces exactly the same kind of inner activity in me. By 'remarkably' I mean that there is no further explanation for this. Even if I call it instinctive, nothing is explained thereby. And yet this use of words is quite proper.... What is important for our existence, nature, wise as she is, has taken into her own hands and made into a matter of instinct removed from our own control. It is precisely because of this instinct that I cannot grasp the laughing face without the evocation of the same kind of inner activity." (409) One still wonders about the questions raised by Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*, how do I recognize a face as such in the first place? cf. Lipps' discussion of the "act" (Akt, vs "activity", Aktivitat) of interpreting a sentence as an "expression" of meaning, 405-6.
 9. Cf. Heidegger, "Of course it is indisputable that a lively mutual acquaintanceship on the basis of Being-with, often depends upon how far one's own Dasein has understood itself at the time; but this means that it depends only how far one's essential Being with Others has made itself transparent and has not disguised itself" (*ibid.*, 162)
 10. "Aesthetic experience is a certain mode of feeling affected when I am paying aesthetic attention, when I give myself up wholly to what has been represented. It is an experiencing which does not affect me as a real individual, as a part of the context of reality, but only as the aesthetic spectator living and moving in a world of aesthetic representation, far removed from actuality" (EAP, 411).

Department of Philosophy
 Ashland University
 Ashland, Ohio, U.S.A.