

THE OTHER IN VIEW: EMPATHY, ATTENTION
AND VISIBILITY. AN INTERVIEW WITH SUSANNE
SCHMETKAMP

KHÖREIN: How do you understand the concept of “emotionality” in your research, and what theoretical implications follow from it in comparison with traditional theories of emotion?

SUSANNE SCHMETKAMP: I advocate a narrative component theory of emotion. On this view, emotions consist of several components, including a judgment, a bodily sensation, a motivation, and a valence (pleasant or unpleasant). Many emotions, especially intense ones such as anger or jealousy, are narratively structured: they unfold through a beginning, a climax, and an end and can, so to speak, be “told.”

KH: To what extent are emotions dependent on culture and context, and what methodological consequences does this have for philosophical analysis?

SS: Emotions have transcultural features, but their concrete manifestations are shaped by culture and context. Cultural and social norms can strongly influence not only how people express emotions, but also how those emotions feel.

KH: In what ways can emotions perform epistemic functions, and under what conditions may they be regarded as legitimate sources of knowledge?

SS: Emotions can have considerable epistemic value. Through them, we can understand the perspective we take on a situation, an object, a person, or a place, as well as the judgment embedded in that perspective—for example, that something is threatening or that someone gives us a sense of security. In seeking to understand the emotions of others, we can likewise discern this epistemic content.

KH: It sometimes seems that contemporary societies are increasingly impatient with grief, dependency, and vulnerability. Do you think this difficulty in remaining present with the suffering of others also weakens our capacity for empathy?

SS: Empathy presupposes a particular form of attention—more precisely, attention to another person’s concrete perspective, experiences, and concerns. The phenomenologist Thomas Fuchs diagnoses a narcissistic tendency in contemporary society: people increasingly seek self-presentation and self-mirroring, which means that, instead of truly being “with the other,” they remain with themselves. Regarding impatience, I see two further tendencies. One is the impulse to overcome suffering and pain as quickly as possible, to heal and optimize one’s life and oneself without delay. This tendency is inscribed in capitalist, neoliberal societies. The other is an overemphasis on one’s own vulnerability and woundedness. It is both good and important that suffering be perceived and acknowledged, but overidentification is just as problematic as disregard.

KH: Iris Murdoch often describes attention as requiring a temporary loosening of the ego—what she calls “unselfing.” Could one argue that contemporary social and media environments make such moments increasingly difficult?

SS: As I have already suggested, there are tendencies—and diagnoses—of this kind. Many people find it difficult to step back from themselves and set their own ego aside. Even in seemingly empathetic conversations, people often move very quickly to their own experience and project it onto the other. Empathy and ethical attention in Murdoch’s sense require an “other-oriented viewpoint” rather than a “self-oriented viewpoint.”

KH: How should philosophy and ethics approach emotions that are socially stigmatized or pathologized—such as shame or anger—particularly in political and clinical contexts?

SS: Grief provides a revealing example. Philosophy, but also society more broadly, often struggles to allow or examine this feeling—or cluster of feelings—because it is stigmatized as “unpleasant” or “negative.” As a result, its epistemic value is not brought into view. Grief may instead be categorized as a “disorder” after a relatively short period, for example

when, after six or twelve months, a person continues to think obsessively and longingly about someone they have lost, or about something else of existential significance. Grief is then perceived as a deficiency or a state of lack, rather than taken seriously in terms of its possible value. Anger, meanwhile, shows how emotions can be perceived and evaluated differently along gendered lines. Recent work in philosophy and cultural studies has increasingly examined the value and appropriateness of such emotions, particularly in relation to marginalized groups.

KH: You describe aesthetic experience as a possible way of loosening the ego's hold on perception. Do you think art can still cultivate forms of attention that are increasingly displaced in contemporary social life?

SS: Absolutely. Art—as well as other objects, activities, and experiences not governed by a specific purpose—fosters different forms of attention. Contemporary society privileges functional, goal-directed, and instrumental attention. Yet free-floating attention is equally important: at its best, it allows us to experience ourselves in the here and now. Aesthetic attention in particular has a distinctive quality; it is free from determining judgments, prejudices, and projections. Cultivating it therefore also has political and democratic significance.

KH: Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch both suggest that the moral life depends less on applying rules than on the quality of our attention. Do you see empathy as connected to this idea of moral attention?

SS: In its strongest sense, I understand empathy as an allocentric shift of perspective: taking up another person's perspective while distancing oneself as far as possible from one's own first-person perspective, judgments, desires, and experiences. Weil and Murdoch describe moral attention, or the "loving gaze," in a similar way—as a selfless attitude detached from one's own ego. Murdoch also shows how this detachment from the ego can be achieved through aesthetic experience.

KH: Your reflections on architecture suggest that visibility is never neutral: spaces direct attention toward certain bodies while rendering others almost invisible. Do you think empathy, too, is politically shaped by regimes of visibility and invisibility?

SS: Yes. Empathy presupposes attention, and attention is strongly directed within political space. Who is deemed worthy of attention? On whom does the gaze of others fall, and in what way? These questions strongly affect whether and how we empathize and feel with others.

KH: There is an apparent paradox: people sometimes find it easier to empathize with fictional characters than with the people they encounter in everyday life. What does this tell us about the nature of empathic understanding?

SS: I would not describe this as a paradox. Fiction offers a kind of “moral relief.” we are relieved of the obligation to intervene in what fictional characters undergo because we cannot intervene and therefore need not do so, in keeping with the principle that “ought implies can.” This allows readers and viewers to engage differently with what happens in fiction. The motivational component of the emotions involved—fear for a character, for instance, or compassion for them—is, as it were, suspended. This does not mean that such emotions have no consequences or relevance, or that they cannot entail moral responsibility. Empathic engagement with fiction becomes epistemically and ethically valuable when it transfers into real life—for example, when it enables or facilitates the understanding of others, especially perspectives that are unfamiliar to us.

KH: You argue that aesthetic attention differs from ordinary practical attention because it does not immediately select and evaluate according to utility or self-interest. Might empathy require a similar suspension of instrumental perception?

SS: Ideally, empathy, understood as the shift of perspective described above, should be guided by curiosity, openness, and appreciation of the other person. Tactical or instrumental forms of empathy certainly exist. But when we call someone particularly “empathetic,” we usually mean something more: that they are especially capable of engaging with others with genuine interest and of putting themselves in someone else’s place—not merely out of instrumental interest, but for the sake of the other person.

KH: Architecture structures how people appear to one another—who becomes visible, who remains peripheral, and how attention is

distributed. Can such spatial arrangements shape in advance what is perceptible in others at all?

SS: Architecture does direct attention. If a lift for people with mobility impairments, wheelchair users, or those with prams is positioned outside the relevant frameworks situated outside the relevant configurations—for example, away from a museum’s principal entrance—these groups effectively disappear from view. They may formally have “access,” but that access is usually visible only to those who need it.

KH: You have also written about empathy in relation to humanoid robots and artificial intelligence. What interests you philosophically about these relationships and does empathy necessarily presuppose another consciousness, or can it also arise through projection and interaction?

SS: I find it fascinating how readily we ascribe human qualities to AI—something we already do with fictional characters in literature and film, so in that sense it is not entirely new. What is new, and increasingly common, is the emergence of new kinds of relationships with AI, including friendships and even romantic relationships. Empathy does not necessarily presuppose another consciousness: as children, we already empathize with fictional characters, and this is a very important experience for our development. It is possible that empathy is also exercised through such interactions.

KH: Which spatial qualities—such as lighting, materiality, or proportion—seem to you empirically and conceptually most relevant to fostering or inhibiting particular emotional states?

SS: Spatial design, acoustics, and materials clearly shape whether, and in what ways, people feel at ease. At the same time, this varies individually and culturally. I also believe that individuals have some responsibility for discovering what supports or hinders them personally. Following Hartmut Rosa, however, I would agree that certain factors intensify our resonance with others and with the world, while others diminish it, and that resonance is a valuable experience within a good life.

KH: Which open questions in the philosophy of emotion do you consider most urgent?

SS: I see considerable research potential in empathy and attention, especially aesthetic attention, a concept I have emphasized in my own work. Loss, grief, and trauma also seem to me crucial fields of inquiry. Grief in particular has only recently begun to receive sustained attention; it was previously largely ignored by mainstream philosophy. Yet grief is perhaps the emotional experience that all of us will undergo, albeit differently and sooner or later, and the ways in which it is recognized—or not recognized—reveal a great deal about our societies. In Western societies oriented toward progress and self-optimization, loss and grief are treated as scandalous and shameful. This attitude not only obstructs the vital process of grieving, but also undermines its potential.

KH: What do you think contemporary philosophy still finds most difficult to acknowledge about emotional life?

SS: Although philosophy is now devoting more attention to these matters, it still does too little work on so-called negative emotions, psychological distress, illness, and pain. All of these are also part of our lives and should be given more space.

Interview conducted by Željko Radinković and Sara Dragišić.