



# Existenz

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## Review of Lou Agosta, *Empathy in the Context of Philosophy*

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**Abstract:** This review was presented on April 20, 2011 at the American Philosophical Association Pacific Division Annual Meeting in San Diego, CA. The session, *Author meets Critics: Empathy in the Context of Philosophy*, was organized by the Karl Jaspers Society of North America.

"We do not know what empathy is," the author claims and announces, "This book is an attempt to find out."<sup>1</sup> What follows is a stimulating and clarifying inquiry that specifically provides the reader with an insightful path leading step by step through assertions, suggestions, contributions, contradictions, inconsistencies, conceptual gaps and, foremost, to a successful virtual meeting between Martin Heidegger, Max Scheler, Edmund Husserl, John Searle, Heinz Kohut and even Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Thomas Mann, the latter two speaking through their literary characters.

Agosta is the witness and promoter of this event, and he has taken personal notes with his own perceptions about it. He proposes the task to corroborate what those who have been invited to this meeting can tell us about empathy. But these partners themselves are not explicitly able to add something new to what has been said, so the author's approach is "taking a stand" in empathy ("the possibility of the

possibility" itself, as he mentions at one occasion), in order to make a critical examination possible. The real philosophical critique requires being open to what Karl Jaspers called *sim-philosophizing* (or *co-philosophizing*) whose core condition is empathy.<sup>2</sup> Agosta takes on this requirement for his discussion, which is not "on," but "with" the participating partners, as he empathically engages with them and makes clear the points of agreement and disagreement—not only among the participants, but also from within the discourse that each of them contributes. He insists that sometimes it is necessary to go against what was said by this or that thinker. After all, "empathic search" does not mean one must agree with others on everything. That would not be empathy, but a way of neglecting it, while empathy opens up the ability to listen to the other as well as to oneself: "The work we are doing takes its orientation from empathy, not from Heidegger; from empathy, not from Husserl; from empathy, not from Searle; from empathy, not from Kohut (following Freud) and so on"

<sup>1</sup> Lou Agosta, *Empathy in the Context of Philosophy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2010, p. xiii. [Henceforth cited as *ECP*]

<sup>2</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Filosofía 1*, transl. Fernando Vela, San Juan de Puerto Rico: Ediciones de la Universidad de Puerto Rico 1958, p. 517 [my translation].

(ECP 4). The empathic search criticizing the aforementioned thinkers gears Agosta toward his goals—in other words, if it is interpreted as having a previous concept of empathy or some valid empirical reference to this, then the statement ends up as a *petitio principii*.

A smoldering question seems to be appearing, when Agosta claims, "the guiding principle here is the contribution of empathy to human understanding and community, not the comfort, convenience or reputation of a particular thinker, school of thought or intellectual tradition" (ECP 6). Granted, the author is not interested in justifying himself—or his interpretation—as following or advocating some conception about criteria to base his selection of thinkers for his inquiry about empathy. The selection of the participants does not seem to be incidental, because Agosta is primarily interested in achieving two goals. The first is to provide the coordinates that would make possible the development of an ontology of empathy:

We are not referring to historical, developmental or (as Heidegger would say) "ontical" considerations...we want to grasp what about the empathic relationship is such that the one with whom empathy is occurring gives the empathizer her or his being human (humanness) independently of particular experiences—as a matter of a necessary and general philosophical distinction. [ECP xvi]

This could be considered a pre-condition in order to revisit the discussion on empathy that hermeneutic thinkers linked to the method of social sciences during the twentieth century. Indeed, Agosta's second goal is to rethink the thesis on empathy as a condition for the interpretations of social events (in the spirit of Wilhelm Dilthey, although he never used the term "empathy" in this sense and identified it with the concept of "understanding" as a method of human sciences). Agosta makes a brief reference to the so-called mirror neurons and its significance for understanding empathy, but his work, as its title expresses, focuses mostly on the philosophical discussion about empathy. References to literature and folk tales are rather complementary to the main focus, so they are unfolded in the spirit of philosophical discussion.

If I understood Agosta properly, then empathy represents for the author something more than a method for interpreting social events (this thesis is only limited to epistemology), because empathy, according to Agosta, provides the very foundation for human community: "Empathy intends a community,

communalization, communality. Here 'communalization' means the process of generating a community" (ECP 126); and also: "In some instances, it is useful to apply a lesson learned from Heidegger, and interpret a thinker against himself in the interest of a full, rich unpacking of the power of empathy in providing a foundation for human community" (ECP 5).

Approaching the subject from a Husserlian philosophy to criticize psychologism, the author believes that individuals—and individual minds—are not only socially and culturally involved, but they are socially constituted so their psychological and emotional life cannot be understood outside a social context. Making sense of other minds has to be more than a culturally mediated activity, because such activity is an ingredient of culture and society itself. Following Agosta, empathy is not only a capacity focused in socialization or communalization, but it simultaneously generates them. This brings up the question of whether the possibility of an ontology of empathy unpacks not only a "hermeneutic circle" of empathy (a proposed interpretation by the author, besides "the unwritten chapter of *Being and Time*" that Agosta refers in his work—which undoubtedly contributes to reduce this gap), but also the possibility of an ontological foundation of social sciences and theories of culture, being empathy the very core of this possibility. This conclusion is not explicit in the inquiry, which however remains explicitly elusive regarding to any commitment with the traditions and schools of thought which have addressed the issue of empathy.

In fact, Agosta's concept of empathy as a basis for socialization (community) inherent to the human condition (that makes "human beings" "being humans," as he prefers to say) is developed from Heidegger: "A rehabilitation of empathy and an authentic definition and implementation of empathy" requires to be supported "in the spirit of Heidegger's approach" (ECP 17) as a starting point that provides the possibility for ontology. In keeping with Husserl and moving towards Searle's theory of intentionality of speech, Agosta also examines Kohut's contributions to psychoanalysis (self psychology) and his suggestions about empathy implicitly related with the transcendental argument:

Granted that we do have these experiences of expressing and being affected by others' feelings, of becoming aware that the feelings of another have an impact on our own, we ask: How is this possible? We find that it is necessary to posit some capacity or

competence—let us call it "empathy" — upon pain of contradiction if we refuse it. [ECP 140]

The hermeneutics, the intentionality, the transcendental argument as interpretations or methods can be translated according Agosta because they refer to different instances of contingency that are inherent to empathy itself. However, Agosta emphasizes that the power of such translation lies in conducting the articulation of different methods to find out the results or contents either being common or depending to a specific method. Understanding empathy as the foundation for the community becomes the remarkable and common result which has been reached by different methods and interpretations in Agosta's work, but apparently the author's insistence on the fortuitous nature of the methods is not extended to such result.

At the end of this work, a final question is necessary: to what extent can, if at all, the path proposed by Agosta overcome the dispute about this fascinating phenomenon—empathy, if this is identified with an insufficiently broad conception not only for the foundation of proceedings in the social sciences, but also for the possibility (from an universal principle) of human community itself?