

THE (UN)KNOWABLE SELF AND OTHERS: CRITICAL EMPATHY AND EXPRESSIVISM

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The common rap against expressivism is that it is solipsistic, endeavoring to give clear expression to a personal voice speaking an individual truth. In this understanding of expressivism the social and constitutive qualities of language are largely ignored in favor of personal revelation. James Berlin aligns what he calls “expressionistic” rhetorics with Platonism and later also psychoanalysis and depth psychology (1987). I also align expressivism with psychology, but in this case current understandings of empathy from developmental and social psychology. I do so in order to propose an understanding of critical expressivism that builds upon critical empathy to examine personal understanding and identity within a network of social and affective connections.

Any description of expressivism can be problematic because, like current-traditional rhetoric, it is a category created to encompass a constellation of more and less disparate approaches that share some key features. As Peter Elbow notes in this volume, there are relatively few who claim to be expressivists. The label is more commonly placed on others and other approaches in a pejorative sense. The diverse nature of those approaches is recognized by Berlin, who proposes a spectrum of expressionists, with the “anarchists” of a completely uninhibited writing on one end, and on the other “the few that are close to the transactional category—especially to epistemic rhetoric” (1987, pp. 145-146). Those few include Ken Macrorie, Donald Murray, and Elbow. As Berlin describes their brand of expressivism:

These rhetoricians see reality as arising out of the interaction of the private vision of the individual and the language used to express this vision. In other words, in this view language does not simply record the private vision, but becomes involved in shaping it. The unique inner glimpse of the individual is still primary, but language becomes an element in its nurturing. This brand of expressionistic rhetoric finally falls short of being epistemic ... because it denies the place of

intersubjective, social processes in shaping reality. (1987, p. 146)

The role of language in this description adds a social element to what is otherwise solipsistic. Language is the “shaping” and “nurturing” element of the private vision of that deeper individual. I am not as certain as Berlin that intersubjective and social processes are not already here in the shaping function of language. Critical empathy offers a way to employ the personal to inform the intersubjective and social. Indeed, the social qualities and questioning of the personal in its assumptions and limitations is vital to the practice of critical empathy. This is what needs to be added to an expressivism as described by Berlin: more awareness and questioning of those social elements and an examination of the relationships between the personal and the social in forming that not-quite-so-private understanding of others as well as oneself.

In this chapter I use theories of perspective-taking and critical empathy to argue for a critical expressivism that moves beyond the limited personal that Berlin identified as common to expressionist rhetorics. Berlin’s characterizations are useful in providing a rough map of the historical disciplinary terrain and in providing terminology for discussing topographical differences. But an updated understanding of both critical expressivism and empathy provides a more accurate mapping of the epistemological and rhetorical work of the personal. Some of these features were already inherent in the work of Elbow and others, as Berlin notes. Critical empathy makes clearer the social and affective dimensions of a working critical expressivism. It calls for a critical voice that questions the circumstances of its own speaking. A critical expressivism, rooted here again in psychology and critical empathy, offers a social critique of that otherwise personal voice, its privileges and assumptions, while recognizing that no voice is purely individual, just as no language is a language of one’s own. The vital questions asked in a critical empathy concern social relations, power differences, affective connections, and commonalities and differences. Critical expressivism through critical empathy fosters a voice that speaks in order to simultaneously ask these questions. It uses knowledge of oneself—and an ongoing critique of that knowledge—to better understand and communicate with others about one another and the world.

PERCEIVING SELF AND OTHER

I begin with theories of identification and perspective-taking as a way to establish how processes of empathy are always concerned with the tensions and questions of knowing about the self and others. Personal knowledge, in this

critical sense, is always more than personal. The tension between self and other in processes of empathy, and the tendency to shift between those perspectives, reminds me of F. Scott Fitzgerald's (1945/1994) notion that "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function" (p. 520). Processes of empathy may attempt to keep both self- and other-centered perspectives in mind at the same time. The relation of these processes, as with definitions of empathy itself, varies according to theorist. Some define empathy to include only other-oriented perspective-taking (Coplan, 2011), while others define empathy more broadly to also include self-oriented perspective-taking (Hoffman, 2001). While I align myself with the broader definition, a review of both types of identification and the tensions between them helps demonstrate how a critical empathy might productively foreground such tensions within a critical expressivist framework.

Developmental psychologist Martin Hoffman defines what he calls "self-focused role-taking" as "when people observe someone in distress [and] they may imagine how they would feel in the same situation" (2001, p. 54). For Hoffman, this involves a similarity in affective experience—essential to his definition of empathy as "an affective response more appropriate to another's situation than one's own" (2001, p. 4)—because "if they can do this vividly enough, they may experience some of the same affect experienced by the victim" (2001, p. 54). Hoffman's emphasis here is on people in distress, but the same process can apply to other situations and affective states. He offers self-focused role-taking as a way to imagine how the self would feel in the other's position. This applies one's own experiences and background, as well as the narratives and interpretations that one carries to another affective state and circumstance. The focus remains throughout on how the self would feel if the self were in that other's position. In contrast, Hoffman's "other-focused role-taking" occurs when "on learning of another's misfortune, people may focus directly on the victim and imagine how he feels; and doing this may result in their feeling something of the victim's feeling" (2001, p. 54). Hoffman allows only that one may feel "something" of another's feelings. Other-focused role-taking is much more limited and more difficult than self-focused role-taking because one can only have partial and largely imagined access to another's affective states and what another makes of those affective states. At the same time, however, other-focused perspective-taking may provide greater insight into the causes and consequences of another's affective state (Matravers, 2011). The limits of knowledge about others is also at the core of philosopher Amy Coplan's emphasis on other-oriented perspective-taking. Self-oriented perspective-taking, she argues, "leads to a type of pseudo-empathy since people often mistakenly believe that it provides them with access to the other's point of view when it does not" (2011, p. 12). It follows that "one of the benefits

of drawing attention to the distinction between self-oriented and other-oriented perspective-taking is that perhaps some of us will begin to stop assuming that we ‘get’ the other’s experience, when we do not.” (Coplan, 2011, p. 12). While self-oriented perspective-taking may contribute to a stronger affective response, other-oriented perspective-taking requires more active imaginative and affective regulation and results in a stronger differentiation of an otherwise blurry boundary between affective states and knowledge among self and other. Other-focused role-taking can be less susceptible to biases, which are always a risk of empathy, and more amenable to critical processes. This is one of the benefits of a critical empathy, the acknowledgement and questioning of one’s own assumptions.

The sometimes blurry and problematic nature of that boundary between self and other in identification and perspective-taking is evident in the many types of biases inherent in processes of empathy. These include egocentric biases, false empathies, and biases of proximity and familiarity. Of particular interest here is Hoffman’s notion of “egoistic drift” (2001), which illustrates the slippery nature of empathy and the tendency to slide in empathy toward the more comfortable and familiar. Egoistic drift occurs when within the process of empathy one’s attention begins to shift away from an other-focused perspective and more toward one’s own affective experience of empathizing. The irony is that the very process of identification that drives empathy can at the same time sever empathy as the observer responds more affectively to his own memories and associated affected states, which are initiated at the observation and perspective-taking of another. Egoistic drift and associated biases demonstrate how empathic identification is constantly in flux, shifting between self and other and among memory, situation, and affect. There is the constant risk of slipping into egoistic drift or, for the sake of avoiding egoistic drift, losing the affective power and accuracy of empathy. Identifying with another is also identifying with oneself and always at risk of slipping further adrift. This is the paradox of trying to see the world of another through one’s own eyes. It requires, as Martha Nussbaum argues, “a kind of ‘twofold attention,’ in which one both imagines what it is like to be in the sufferer’s place and, at the same time, retains securely the awareness that one is not in that place” (2003, p. 328). Here again in the idea of a “twofold attention,” which Nussbaum borrows from Richard Wollheim, is a reminder of Fitzgerald’s notion of a first-rate intelligence as applied to rhetorics of empathy. That twofold attention is exactly the work of a critical expressivism through critical empathy. In acknowledging the implied paradox of identifying simultaneously with self and other, it asks that we see the world with twofold attention. This is an important shift, because in applying a twofold attention one is compelled to ask questions of relation and purpose that may not otherwise be so obvious or demanding. There is a sense, then, that like any paradox, that of empathic identification with

self and other points through its seeming contradictions to greater insights into processes of understanding self and other in the work of critical expressivism.

THE PERSONAL AS COMMUNICATION AND BELIEF

Empathy's communicative importance is well established in the work of Carl Rogers. He argues for empathy in contrast to more competitive and judgmental moves in communication. Rogers finds the major barrier to communication to be "this tendency to react to any emotionally meaningful statement by forming an evaluation of it from our own point of view" (1961, p. 331). Without using the word "empathy" here, he proposes a communication strategy that nonetheless is very much grounded in empathy:

Real communication occurs, and this evaluative tendency is avoided, when we listen with understanding. What does that mean? It means to see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, to sense how it feels to him, to achieve his frame of reference in regard to the thing he is talking about. (1961, pp. 331-332)

Rogers' work on empathy is based upon the relationship between therapist and client in a clinical context. Although Rogers is not concerned with the rhetorical use of empathy—and even rejects the role of empathy in the employ of argumentation—he does offer much of use in defining empathy and its communicative and epistemological potential. Rogers focuses on empathy as an emotional perspective, as a means of understanding, and as potentially transformative in how it can change people and their interpersonal relationships. He understands empathy to be a powerful position of listening. Rogers' influence and his attention to empathy have had a significant influence in rhetorical theory. Elbow, for example, similarly offers his believing game as a positive alternative to the traditional doubting game. Elbow has come to see the believing game as the core of his work. He describes it as

the disciplined practice of trying to be as welcoming or accepting as possible to every idea we encounter: not just listening to views different from our own and holding back from arguing with them; not just trying to restate them without bias; but actually trying to believe them. We are using believing as a tool to scrutinize and test. (2009, p. 1)

Elbow's believing game differs from Rogerian rhetoric in important ways—the reference to "not just trying to restate them without bias" (2009, p. 2) is one

of those—but more importantly it includes a process of empathy. The move to not only understand other points of view but to try to believe them is at its heart an exercise in empathy; it is an attempt to enter as fully as possible into another's perspective and even another's experience of holding that perspective. Elbow recognizes that such a move has cognitive, phenomenological, emotional, and physical qualities. In an earlier draft of his contribution to this collection, he advises that one “eat like an owl,” which means “just listening and swallowing and even trying to believe their (other's) experiences no matter how odd they seem.” He adds that “writers should trust that their organism will automatically let go of what's useless or misleading and benefit from what's useful.” The idea that writers should trust their organism is a nod to ways of thinking beyond the purely cognitive to include the emotional and physiological, as empathy pushes people to do. This is not to reduce Elbow's method to purely trusting your gut. Elbow stresses the methodical nature of the believing game as a form of critical inquiry into the value of ideas, all of which is based upon the practice of empathy in a critical expressivist framework.

Empathy occupies a central position in how we imagine and come to understand ourselves and others, and both self- and other-oriented perspective-taking rely upon some degree of personal knowledge. In self-oriented, the empathizer or observer is imagining him or herself in the position of the other and drawing from experiences and emotions analogous to the context and conditions of the observed. In other-oriented perspective-taking, the observer still must draw upon his or her own experiences in attempting to imagine the state of the observed. Philosopher Derek Matravers allows that a person may move beyond personal history to experience empathy even in regard to emotions that he or she has not previously experienced personally by empathizing “face to face with another who is experiencing some strong emotions, or describing some situation with strong emotion” (2011, p. 28). In these cases, emotions in empathy may be recalled from one's past emotions and experiences in self-oriented perspective-taking and may be experienced personally through direct engagement with the emotions of another. In either case, the personal recollection or immediate personal experience of the emotions becomes a necessary part of empathy.

As evident in Rogers, Elbow, Matravers, and elsewhere, empathy uses the personal constructively as a route to knowledge about oneself and others. This incorporation of the personal differs from that characterized as solipsistic. When Berlin describes expressivism as concerned only with self-calibrated truths, private and incommunicable to others, he may be accurately describing some types of personal writing, but seems to be lumping together the merely personal with the possibly critically so. As Elbow argues in this volume, there are many ways that writing may be personal in topic, in language, and in thought. I would

add empathy or perspective-taking to Elbow's list of personal ways of thinking and writing. It is an employment of the believing game when one imagines, in self-oriented perspective-taking, "what if I were myself in that other person's situation?" Or, in other-oriented perspective-taking, "what if I were that other person in that other person's situation?" To attempt to experience and know these positions is a cognitive, affective, and bodily move toward belief, understanding, and communication. In these ways and others critical empathy is a personal mode, one that uses personal imagination, experiences, and knowledge in order to arrive at greater understanding of self, others, and society. This is a different use of the personal than inward-gazing self-discovery. And yet empathy as a personal mode remains a liability because of its inherent assumptions and biases, as illustrated in the concept of egoistic drift. This is why a critical empathy, one that questions its own understanding, is such an important component of a critical expressivism.

THE NECESSARY AND CONSTANT CRITIQUE OF EMPATHY

Although scholars in the humanities have recently seized upon empathy as perhaps best representing the hopes, values, and social purposes of a liberal arts education, empathy itself is not without useful academic skepticism and criticism. Amy Shuman calls for a critique of empathy in the circulation and telling of other people's stories. She finds liberatory possibilities via empathy in critiquing dominant narratives, even as "empathy is always open to critique as serving the interests of the empathizer rather than the empathized" (2005, p. 18). Empathy may be a way for some tellers to claim ownership, knowledge, or privilege over another's story. At the same time, Shuman notes that stories need to travel beyond their owners in order to accomplish cultural work. This is part of the paradox, Shuman writes, because: "Empathy is one of the failed promises of narrative, but in that failure, it provides the possibility of critique and counternarrative, providing whatever redemptive, emancipatory, or liberatory possibilities narrative holds" (2005, p. 19). Processes of empathy are both promise and failed promise. But just as the liabilities of empathy can prove to be a productive asset, so can the failed promise allow some redemption through the possibilities of counternarratives. The primary question that needs to be asked, as Theresa Kulbaga has argued, is "empathy to what ends?" (2008, p. 518). This gets to the rhetorical and epistemological purposes of empathy and helps raise further questions about the relationships between empathizers and the empathized. Explaining her idea of a critique of empathy, as well as the possibilities of empathy, Shuman writes

Empathy offers the possibility of understanding across space and time, but it rarely changes the circumstances of those who

suffer. If it provides inspiration, it is more often for those in the privileged position of empathizer rather than empathized. Storytelling needs a critique of empathy to remain a process of negotiating, rather than defending, meaning. The critique of empathy, and the recognition of the inevitably failed promises of storytelling, avoids an unchallenged shift in the ownership of experience and interpretation to whoever happens to be telling the story and instead insists on obligations between tellers, listeners, and the stories they borrow. (2005, p. 5)

A critique of empathy foregrounds the relationships among those who are involved with the story, its provenance, its telling, and its rhetorical and social application. Shuman's critique of empathy is also a way to guard against the erasure or removal of the other within processes of empathy. The critique of empathy is an attempt to maintain the positive social potential of empathy as a means of understanding and as a mover to action, even while guarding against the liabilities of empathy. In their criticisms of rhetorics of empathy, Kulbaga and Shuman are not discounting empathy but are arguing for a more reflective and responsible understanding and use of rhetorics of empathy.

They are not alone in pushing toward a more critical empathy. Those who advocate for some form of critical empathy do so because of how empathy functions, how it is situated socially and culturally, and how the questions of a critical empathy can themselves help us negotiate larger issues. I borrow the term "critical empathy" from Todd DeStigter, who credits the idea to Jay Robinson. Critical empathy, as DeStigter defines it

refers to the process of establishing informed and affective connections with other human beings, of thinking and feeling with them at some emotionally, intellectually, and socially significant level, while always remembering that such connections are complicated by sociohistorical forces that hinder the equitable, just relationships that we presumably seek. (1999, p. 240)

DeStigter's definition is notable for being both hopeful and realistic. He, like Shuman, is proposing a form of critical empathy that seeks to fulfill the promise of more just relationships while maintaining awareness of the severe limitations and complications that are always part of that empathic seeking. DeStigter's critical empathy is of additional value because it focuses upon the context of empathy as always situated within sociohistorical forces, just as critical expressivism should always recognize an already social self. This brings attention to the circumstances that inform and limit rhetorics of empathy and the differences in social positions among those involved.

DeStigter defines empathy as a way of thinking and feeling, which is in line with how Nussbaum as well as many psychologists, including Hoffman, define empathy. Such definitions of empathy align with a contemporary understanding of empathy from cognitive neuroscience as including processes of both mirroring (purely affective) and imaginative reconstruction (directed cognitive) (Goldman, 2011). In a similar way, Kristie Fleckenstein argues that the thinking and feeling aspects of empathy uniquely situate empathy for reflective and rhetorical work. Fleckenstein writes, “As a complicated mixture of affect and rationality, empathy lends itself to deliberative discourse—to negotiation, debate, and persuasion—in the public sphere and serves as the foundation for social justice” (2007, p. 707). Fleckenstein is responding here to Matthew Newcomb’s essay on compassion in the rhetoric of Hannah Arendt, who defines compassion as purely affective and as creating silences and impeding discourse. Newcomb argues against Arendt that a “Critical compassion can note the issues of appropriating the stories of others and question the need to actually feel like the other” (2007, p. 128). Fleckenstein supports this position in her argument for empathy as already involving thinking; we do not have to rely upon a critical compassion in order to open that rhetorical and evaluative space in empathy. She cites ideas of “realistic empathy” and “critical affirmation” as illustrating the feeling and thinking elements of empathy and the critical roles empathy plays in deliberative discourse. As Fleckenstein writes, “Whether we call it empathy, compassion, realistic empathy, critical affirmation, or critical empathy, the experience of sharing another’s suffering is essential to deliberative discourse, to negotiation, and to persuasion in the public sphere” (2007, p. 714). Critical expressivism would be in good company here. A definition of critical empathy such as provided by Fleckenstein better allows one to acknowledge the interplay and tensions that always exist in thinking and feeling with others and the ways those may be used to arrive at judgments and actions.

Employing critical empathy also enables one to better question and acknowledge differences in economic, political, social, and cultural positions. These are elements of the “complicated sociohistorical forces” that DeStigter mentions. Among the greatest liabilities of processes of empathy is how it can enable the elision of these differences as one individual empathizes with another. Kulbaga already has pointed to this problem in rhetorics of empathy in the case of relatively more privileged Western readers enjoying identification with less privileged others without also reflecting upon the significant differences in experiences and positions. Min-Zhan Lu proposes “critical affirmation,” a term she borrows from Cornel West, as a form of literacy in which reading and writing are employed for the following goals:

- (1) To end oppression rather than to empower a particular

form of self, group, or culture; (2) To grapple with one's privileges as well as one's experience of exclusion; (3) To approach more respectfully and responsibly those histories and experiences which appear different from what one calls one's own; and (4) To affirm a yearning for individual agency shared by individuals across social divisions without losing sight of the different material circumstances which shape this shared yearning and the different circumstances against which each of us must struggle when enacting such a yearning. (1999, p. 173)

Lu proposes these critical affirmation practices in response to how the personal is abused politically. Hers is a reflective approach that allows acknowledgment and revision of one's own affective responses. Critical affirmation is affirmative, hopeful, and politically progressive in the ways in which it allows the building of coalitions based upon the shared yearning for individual agency. And, crucially, Lu's critical affirmation is critical because it is always keeping affirmation—or empathy—from overreaching by foregrounding historical, material, and situational differences. Critical affirmation is most applicable to how we read and write one another's stories, which serve as our sites for empathy and as exercises in critical expressivism. Perhaps it is most critical in how we read and write our own stories. As Lu writes, "I join others to mark writing, especially personal narratives, as a site for reflecting on and revising one's sense of self, one's relations with others, and the conditions of one's life" (1999, p. 173). Lu is arguing for critical affirmation as literate and rhetorical practices that bring one's life and relationships continually into reflection and potential revision. This reads to me as the best possible critical expressivist work, similar to that proposed in this collection by Nancy Mack in her idea of the "critical memoir." I add to these practices rhetorical questions, posed by Kulbaga and Shuman, best represented by the question of empathy to what ends? Likewise, we might ask in the practice of critical expressivism, expressivism to what ends? By foregrounding questions of social positions, differences, and the ends of empathy, a critical empathy guards against risks of appropriating the experiences of others, especially to validate or serve one's own interests.

The tensions in empathy and expressivism require critical practice because of the inherent instability of any moves to empathy or understanding and expression of self. Critical practices necessitate questions about the limits of knowledge and differences in experiences and situations; how empathy and personal writing, often in the form of stories, are positioned, how they function, and what their results are; how emotions, reflections, and evaluations interact; and what the

personal and social effects of these processes are. These are fundamentally epistemological and rhetorical questions that deal with our relations to one another. Because critical empathy demands such questions, these inherent liabilities can be seen as an asset. Critical empathy and critical expressivism push us to ask the questions that we already should be asking. I draw here from the argument of Dennis Lynch, who contends that the necessary move to a critical reflection is among the best reasons to return to the study of rhetorics of empathy. As Lynch writes, “I do not wish to treat empathy as the master concept of rhetoric, nor will I defend empathy against the serious questions that have been raised about it as a practice. I will argue instead that empathy is rhetorically productive not in spite of but because of the dangers to which it is prone” (1998, p. 7). Those dangers push us toward employing a critical empathy that in turns requires us to be more reflective generally of personal questions of epistemology, differences, and relations. A critical empathy continually reminds us that any knowledge of self and others is always at best a careful and purposeful approximation of perspectives, situations, and experiences through the lens of the self.

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