

WEEK 2 ANSWER TO QUESTION 4
STEP 3.3 ASK MARK

I move now to the fourth and final question for this week. And here it comes. Question four: “What is your understanding of the term empathy in neuropsychanalytic terms? How is it measured?”

So there are actually two questions here concerning empathy. The first is what is my understanding of what empathy is? And the second is how does one measure this thing?

Well, a great deal has been said and written and researched in relation to empathy over the last few years. Empathy, the term, derives from German philosophy. In fact, from German aesthetics. And when the term was originally introduced in German – the German word is *einführung*. *Einführung* means, literally translated, “feeling into”. So empathy – which is just a latinisation of that – “feeling into” is what empathy means.

When the term empathy was originally introduced in aesthetics, it didn't apply to psychological matters. It applied to how one feels one's way into work of art. A sculpture or a painting, of course, doesn't have feelings. We, the observers, have to attribute feeling to, for example, a sculpture or a painting of, for example, a weeping willow. We'd say, “the weeping willow looks sad. That's why we call it a weeping willow.” But of course, the willow itself doesn't *feel* sad. Empathy referred to our capacity to inject feeling into that lifeless, intrinsically lifeless image.

It was only secondarily that the term was incorporated into psychology. And there it referred to our capacity to feel our way into the mental state of an external object, which in this case is not an art work but rather another living creature. And indeed, when it was first introduced, it referred to another human being. So the capacity for empathy then referred to how do we go about feeling our way into the mental state of another person.

Now, of course, the big difference between the psychological and the aesthetic meaning of the term is that you can't get it wrong aesthetically. Who's to say whether the willow is weeping or not, whether it's sad or not. You're attributing your own mental states to that object, to an art object. But when it comes to another person, to the extent that you attribute your own mental states to that object, you might be wholly misreading what the mental state of that object is. So in psychology, empathy refers to the capacity to accurately know the state of mind of the other.

So this starts to point toward the question of measurement. The measuring of empathy in the psychological sense of the word has to do with: how good are you at it? How

well can you empathise? If you look at it developmentally, you see little children are actually very bad at empathising. Little children really do believe that, for example, a willow might be weeping, or that a doll that has fallen on its side is asleep. They literally believe it. It's a misattribution of the mental state to another object.

It's a developmental achievement to gradually acquire the capacity for empathy. And this, in fact, has to do with the capacity to suppress your own mental states – to suppress your own feelings, to suppress the inclination to project your feelings into the object – and rather to accurately perceive the mental states of the object in itself. This, as you can hear from what I'm saying, is an extraordinarily difficult thing to do, and can never be done perfectly.

Now the question is, what is the neuropsychanalytical approach to empathy? And here I build again on the answers I've given to the other questions. The neuropsychanalytical perspective is simply saying, in order to ascertain what the mental state of another object is, we don't only have to have recourse to our intuitions, to our guesses, to our imaginings, as to what the other is feeling. We can, nowadays, because of advances in neuroscience, couple our subjective feeling as to what the mental state of the other is, we can couple that with objective observations. For example, a PET or an fMRI scan of the state of the brain of the other.

If I think that the person that I'm empathising with is in a happy state, well, the brain in a happy state looks different from the brain in a sad or an angry state. So we begin to have some objective handle on the degree to which our empathic inferences are correct or not. We begin to have the capacity, that is to say, of some sort of measuring of empathy.

So, that's how I look upon empathy. I think that's how anybody would look upon empathy. And that's what the neuropsychanalytical perspective adds to the problem of empathy. You can see the problem of empathy is deeply bound up with the broader philosophical problem of other minds. Because you can only ever know your own mind, how can you ever determine with any degree of accuracy what the mind of another is, what the mental state of another is. In other words, how can you empathise with any degree of accuracy?

And the approach that I'm taking is to say, well, we have to couple that subjective feeling with an objective perspective. And taking these two things together, we have the beginnings of the prospect of a complete science, a natural science of the mind. I want to emphasise, again, that in doing this, we're not reducing the mind to the brain. We're not excluding the subjective phenomena, the feelings themselves. They are absolutely centre stage for any discipline that claims to be a science of the mind.

The purpose of coupling these subjective observations with the objective ones is to be able to get some sort of scientific grip – some sort of validation, some sort of reliability – into the science of the mind. And it's not only a matter of coupling in order to be able to prove “yes, this is a happy state”, or yes, this is an angry state.” When we see which aspects of the brain are activated in a happy versus, for example, an angry state – by identifying what those brain regions are and what they're connected to and what neurotransmitters are involved – so we have the possibility of gaining new and deeper understanding into what these things actually are.

It's not that anger or happiness actually is a brain state. But by looking at the brain state that correlates with the feeling of happiness or anger and seeing in which ways does the connectivity differ, it gives us a new angle on trying to understand what these feelings are all about. But ultimately, the feelings are just themselves. They are feelings. Nothing more.

So, there we have our four answers for this week in relation to the four questions. They've all been very abstract and difficult questions. But I think that this has something to do with the nature of the subject matter we're dealing with. The subjective quality – the subjective property, the subjective nature – of the mind makes it a very difficult thing to think about and to talk about.

And so I appreciate the opportunity afforded by these four questions to, hopefully, bring a little bit more clarity to what I mean, and to what I believe are these absolutely fundamental starting points for a science of the mind. Thanks very much. Keep those questions rolling in for next week when we're going to deal with the second major property of the mental, which is the capacity for consciousness. Thanks very much.



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