# The Contribution of the Other in Radical Empathy

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## 1. Introduction

We live in a time in which diversity and understanding each other's differences are widely discussed and considered highly valued ideals. There is an increasing amount of research regarding understanding the experiences of people with differing backgrounds (cultural, political and psychological). One such study, within psychiatry, is Matthew Ratcliffe's account on radical empathy. Radical empathy refers to an immersive way of understanding another person's experience by recognising and engaging with their unique existential world, rather than merely interpreting their thoughts and emotions from an external perspective. Radical empathy leads to better interpretations of experiential reports, that way fostering connection, feelings of which are often already diminished for many mental health clients.

Reading Ratcliffe's paper, one might question if and how such an empathic achievement, where one transcends one's own existential world, is possible. Such skepticism might be appropriate when approaching empathy from simulation theories. Ratcliffe's account of empathy, however, includes besides simulation an aspect of self-affection, which possibly makes a difference. While Ratcliffe offers many examples of how self-affection looks like, he does not go into the underlying mechanism. In this paper I aim to explore a possible mechanism underlying self-affection, which allows others to contribute causally to our experience, which would help explain how radical empathy can be achieved.

In the first two sections, I will examine Ratcliffe's concept of radical empathy in more detail and identify the explanandum that the proposed mechanism should explain. In the third section, I will introduce Itay Shani's metaphysical framework of cosmopsychism, which I argue provides a suitable ontological backdrop for our explanandum. Here I will argue that experience can be conceived as fleeting interference patterns arising within quasi-stable configurations of the absolute field of consciousness. In the final section I will argue that these interference patterns can get replicated during interpersonal interaction, such that they become available for empathetic reflection. These replications, causally contributed by the other to our experience, provide exposure to their existential world.

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## 2. Ratcliffe's concept of Radical Empathy

In his paper *Phenomenology as a Form of Empathy,* Ratcliffe explores several key ideas. First, he examines the concept of empathy as simulation, a prominent view within philosophy of mind, which holds that empathy relies on an internal mechanism of simulating thoughts and feelings of others. The implication of such an indirect approach is, however, that we never experience the feeling of another, instead we experience our own feeling and attribute it to the other (Ratcliffe 2012, 475). Merely constructing an experience within the context of our own subjective world raises doubts about whether it truly allows us to understand others' experiences. A complete account of empathy must, therefore, offer more.

Subsequently, Ratcliffe focuses on accounts of empathy within the phenomenological tradition, particularly those of Stein (1989) and Zahavi (2007). They conceive empathy as direct perception, in which we recognize others' behavior directly as an expression of their mind. Perceiving others' experiences, however, only informs us *that* they have a certain feeling or emotion; it does not include an understanding of *why* they feel this way, which is a crucial part of empathy (Ratcliffe 2012, 476). Merely perceiving others' experience is thus, as an account of empathy, not sufficient either.

Concluding his exploration of different existing accounts of empathy, Ratcliffe arrives at a hybrid approach, where empathy, on the one hand, relies on conscious or unconscious simulation, and on the other hand also includes an appreciation of the role of the other in the simulated experience (Ratcliffe 2012, 477). This appreciation of the role of the other is a key idea that Ratcliffe takes from the phenomenological accounts. He reasons as follows: "that x [the person who tries to understand] is involved in process y [the simulated feeling] does not imply that x is responsible for those features that make y distinctive" (Ratcliffe 2012, 476; emphasis mine). It is not entirely clear what Ratcliffe here means by being "responsible" for the distinctive features of a simulated feeling. Therefore, what this responsibility entails will be part of our explanandum. As we will see in the final section, I will interpret this involvement of the other as a causal contribution to our altered experience.

A significant part of the paper Ratcliffe devotes to explaining the radical part of his account. What it comes down to, is that we should recognise that the experiences of others can be structured in radically different ways, such that their whole world appears differently. Especially people suffering from psychological disorders can have a diminished sense of reality and possibility, leading to a dramatically altered existential world that shapes each experience in a

way according to these background feelings. This underlying structure, shaping the *kind* of experiences we have, is what Ratcliffe refers to with 'modal space' (Ratcliffe 2012, 483).

The idea of radical empathy is that; just like we can temporarily suspend or bracket our own circumstances or cultural norms in order to empathise with someone with a different background (culture, age group, etc.), we should also aim to suspend or bracket our own existential world that determines the quality of our own experiences, in order to empathize with someone who's existential world is drastically altered.

## 3. The Self-Affecting Aspect of Radical Empathy

In the final section of his paper, Ratcliffe responds to a possible critique on his account of radical empathy, namely that one could say that such an achievement of empathy, where we could understand a person with a fundamentally different modal space, is simply impossible, because we cannot escape our own modal space (Ratcliffe 2012, 487). In response Ratcliffe emphasizes that radical empathy is self-affecting. The fact that radical empathy can include a perceptual aspect, like the phenomenological accounts mentioned in the beginning, makes it different from "imaginative reconstruction" (Ratcliffe 2012, 488). This emphasis, in response to the skepticism, suggests that the perceptional and self-affecting aspect of radical empathy enables an understanding that empathy as pure simulation cannot provide.

Ratcliffe then illustrates the process of self-affection with several examples of interpersonal interaction, that in general has the quality of being self-affecting. Self-affecting means that your experience is shaped by the other person. "It does not involve replicating the patient's experience. Instead, interaction with the person makes one feel a certain way, and that first-person feeling is at the same time a presentation of his experience" (Ratcliffe 2012, 489). Self-affection thus involves an experience arising in oneself, but one that says something about the other person's inner experience. We see here the same process described that we have earlier identified as our explanandum, the participation of the other in the differing aspects of an experience arising in empathic engagement. In another example Ratcliffe adds that the "interaction reshapes your experience of the world. You do not simply understand the child's experience; you are affected by it" (Ratcliffe 2012, 489). This special kind of experience thus not only says something about the other's experience, but also transforms your own world and quality of experience.

A question that can arise is if self-affection is a necessary aspect for radical empathy, and if and how it differs from the perceptual aspect. Ratcliffe writes that radical empathy *can* have a perceptual aspect to it, implying that, in principle, it is not necessary for radical empathy (Ratcliffe 2012, 488). He also mentions cases of radical empathy employed towards written reports and even imaginary characters, cases that do not involve direct perception (Ratcliffe 2012, 488). Does this mean that these instances of radical empathy lack self-affection, or does the self-affecting aspect not require interaction and perception?

As Ratcliffe does not provide more clarity on this issue, I will assume that self-affection does always involve perception, but that radical empathy does not always involve self-affection. Above non-perceptual cases could be seen as extra sophisticated instances of simulation where one takes into account a different modal space when engaging in imagination. I will not explore these cases in this paper; they will remain an avenue for further research. For now, I will focus on the question of what the self-affective mechanism that underlies most instances of radical empathy could be and how the participation of the other in the transformation of experience works.

## 4. Experience as Interference Patterns

As Ratcliffe's account does not adhere to any metaphysical position, it allows for a mechanistic explanation with any compatible ontology. Therefore, as our ontological framework, I am going to use Shani's panpsychist position called cosmophysism. Not only is it compatible, it also makes for an especially suitable ontological backdrop for a mechanism that should explain participation of one person in the experience of another. Pure simulation approaches, that fail to capture this idea, appear to conceive empathy as an attempt to bridge a fundamental divide between experiential lives of separate subjects, likely due to the physicalist assumption that conscious experiences arise from, and are localized to, physically separated brains. Contrary to physicalist positions, Shani's cosmopsychism does not need to bridge such a fundamental gap.

In this section I will first briefly explain Shani's cosmophysism as he introduces it in his paper *Cosmopsychism: A Holistic Approach to the Metaphysics of Experience* (2015). Building on this I will then propose a definition of perception involving interference patterns and argue that perceiving in this definition can be understood as being affected. In the section following this one, I will finally describe how such a self-affecting process can enable the other to causally contribute to my experience, adding features which resemble the experience of the other.

**4.1 An ocean of Consciousness with Waves, Ripples and Vortices**

In Shani's cosmopsychism the ultimate reduction ground of reality, including all seemingly separate subjective lives, is "a vast, dynamically fluctuating, ocean (or field)" of "cosmic consciousness" (Shani 2015, 389-390 and 411). It is the fabric where all of life and non-living things are made of. They are local disturbances of the field that can be likened to currents, waves, vortices, bubbles and ripples coursing the ocean (Shani 2015, 414). What we perceive as physical objects are quasi-stable patterns that arise from the interferences of waves and currents forming semi-independent configurations, like vortices (Shani 2015, 411 and 414).

The absolute field of consciousness has a pervasive experiential quality to it, though non-centralized and unstructured. In some stable interference structures, due to their complex configuration, consciousness centralises into one point, leading to a unification of consciousness and experience, which we associate with the unique perspective of subjective experience (Shani 2015, 418). Consciousness within such a structure becomes occupied and identified with this stable configuration that sustains its unification. Consequently, due to this inward focus, the illusion arises of a separate experiential field. However, just like the water constituting a wave is still part of the whole ocean, so are all the different waves and vortices of the absolute field still interconnected (Shani 2015, 418).

**4.2 Perception as Being Affected**

Shani does not explain how perception exactly arises, however, he does clarify that "local interference patterns are discerned as phenomenal states" (Shani 2015, 413). We could interpret this meaning that separated experiential fields, themselves being stable interference patterns, contain fleeting internal interference patterns caused by internal movements, which correspond with internal experiences. In addition, we could imagine for example a whirlpool-like structure radiating ripples throughout the rest of the ocean and that those ripples interfere with other quasi-stable structures. I suggest that when another structure, possibly a human "vortice", is reached by those ripples, a fleeting interference pattern arises as part of the total configuration and thus becomes accessible for the unified consciousness within. Such local interference patterns in structures with unified consciousness, caused by external structures, could be understood as perception.

With this definition of perception, we could say that all perception is self-affecting. For example, when we sit outside and feel the warmth of the sun on our skin, our self, the stable structure that defines the "boundaries" of our experiential field, is interfered upon, or affected by,

the sun. These "ripples" radiating from the sun are subtle enough not to damage our structure permanently, at least not immediately, but strong enough to interfere with our structure such that our consciousness notices. The same idea can be applied to perceiving another person, or being affected by another person, the difference being that the ripples that cause the interference are radiated by a structure that has a unified consciousness itself.

## 5. Replicated interference patterns

Perception alone does not yet amount to empathy. Perception supposedly does help us learn something about the thing being perceived. We can imagine that we are directly exposed to the structure of another configuration when its ripples interfere upon us, because these ripples are, in a way, an extension of that configuration. However, even if we get to know a quasi-stable structure, we still have no access to the fleeting interference patterns that arise locally within that structure. Empathy is about understanding the *experience* of another, and should therefore include not only an appreciation of their structure but also of their local fleeting interference patterns, their experiences.

When two structures with a unified consciousness are close to each other, however, they can gain access to fleeting interference patterns depending on the other, but within their own experiential field. For each person multiple fleeting interference patterns arise, or more precisely, a pattern that is the sum total of all influences, including (1) the interference pattern with the other, (2) the interference pattern with other structures in the vicinity and (3) the interference pattern of the other with other structures. Take for example a simplified world with three structures: you, me and the sun. If I am positioned within a distance from you where I am affected both by you and the sun, the ripples radiating from the sun and the ripples radiating from you meet my structure *and* each other.

Continuing the example, If I were then to subtract, in my imagination, my own contribution from the sum total of the fleeting interference pattern, what would be left is an interference pattern of your extended structure and that of the sun. Technically, this pattern is now part of me and thus part of my experience, because it happens within my experiential field. However, because it involves the extended structure of you and the thing you are perceiving, it resembles the interference pattern that happens inside your experiential field. It could be said, therefore, that I have access to a replication, however diluted, of your experience.

We can now connect this idea back to Ratcliffe's description of a crucial component of empathy: the responsibility of the other for the differing features of a simulated feeling. The differing features, the replication, is causally contributed by you to my feeling, the sum total of the interference pattern happening within me. If I am engaging in empathy and pay attention to which features of my experience are different while I interact with you, effectively subtracting or suspending my own contribution, I can see which parts you are responsible for.

When a person's structure is so radically different from ours, and consequently their modal space is so modified that their whole existential world appears differently, just imagining how experience would be like for them would not be effective enough, because the interference patterns we would imagine would still be based on our own structure and model space. I argue that with the above ontological backdrop, radical empathy can be interpreted as relying on the mechanism of interference, specifically a replication of interference patterns, which enables us to access structures foreign to us and pick up on differences in experience that can differ in radical ways from our ordinary experience.

## 6. Conclusion

Ratcliffe's concept of radical empathy is a hybrid approach to empathy that includes both simulation and an appreciation of the role of the other in the differing features of the simulated feeling. In this paper I have argued that the latter part is what makes radical empathy possible, because it exposes us to the modal structure of the other which is inaccessible by imagination alone.

Within cosmopsychism, as introduced by Shani, experiences can be understood as fleeting interference patterns arising within quasi-stable structures with unified consciousness. I proposed that these interference patterns are caused by "ripples" radiating from all kinds of configurations coursing the absolute field of consciousness. I argued further that being interfered upon as a structure, captures the essence of being affected, leading me to the conclusion that a possible mechanism of the self-affecting aspect in perception and empathy could be such interference.

Finally, I have defined the role of the other in the simulated feeling, as a causal contribution to the sum total of the fleeting interference patterns that arise within the experiential field of the person interacting with them. When this person, engaging in empathy, would subtract, in imagination, from their experience their own structural contribution, what would remain would be

the unfamiliar parts of the experience constituted by the other and resembling the experience that happens within them. This subtraction could be understood as suspending our own existential world and modal space, which is what would transform mundane empathy into radical empathy.

With this account I have attempted to give an ontological explanation for how radical empathy could be possible in principle. However, the practical feasibility remains a question for further research.

## 7. References

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