A New Ethics of Empathy?

Articulating the Normative Grounds of Cultural Understanding[i]

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Introduction: Grounding Ethics in Empathy?

It may appear unusual but let us begin with the reasons that would speak against grounding ethics in empathy.

First, if empathy is a feeling, and thus a psychic state, does it not lack the necessary resources to ground the required normativity that a true philosophical ethics must establish? Can the emotive 'is' be bridged toward an empathetic 'ought'? What would need to be shown is that basic phenomena—intuitions that constitute empathetic phenomena—entail indeed sources of normativity.

Second, does the laudable concern, the compassion and sympathy with others as vulnerable selves not miss the equally crucial recognition of others as autonomous agents? Is it really possible to reconstruct the respect for human dignity, for the human as a reflexive self-determining subject, from roots in emotively grounded care attitudes? Yet if empathetic recognition could be shown to be complex enough to encompass the self—understanding of the Other, and if in such self-understanding her autonomy resides, empathy would not thus fail.

Finally, are not empathetic acts of putting yourself in the Other's shoes prone to project your own, situational and partial understanding onto the Other, thus construct the Other despite all good intentions, turn her literally into *your* 'alter ego' into a dependent, unrecognized quasi-copy of your own worldview? Here, naturally, a reflexive assessment of one's own empathetic projections would have to curtail the inevitable initial biases and distortions that any situated understanding may entail.

If these are plausible, and indeed much discussed dangers or predicaments regarding the use and abuse of empathy in moral reasoning, a project that aims to 'ground ethics in empathy' will have to ultimately answer and overcome them. This is one reason why empathetic ethics is intrinsically connected to cultural understanding—both are to illuminate their normative force via their complementarity. The focus and ultimate orientation toward making ethics work for

cultural dialogues prevents, as we shall see, empathy to become a stale subject- or situation-based projection. But the reconstruction of empathy as *cognitive perspective-taking* also reveals the always involved normativity in cultural understanding.

The project to probe the potential of empathy (imaginative-perspective-taking) for the grounding of normative attitudes both as an ethics of agency and as an explication of normative implications of understanding should proceed, so I argue, via a *social phenomenology*.

This is fueled by three background assumptions.

1. A metaphysical, theological, or even transcendental grounding is no longer possible. Thought is inescapably socially, culturally, and historically situated, and thus cannot proceed to provide an essentialist foundation prior to its own hermeneutic understanding. Contemporary movements like hermeneutics, post-structuralism, critical theory, or pragmatism brought this point home.

2. The Kantian vision of a universal morality which recognizes and respects human dignity in a *transcendental subject*—such that the human being may never be made a mere means to someone's else ends, but always be an end-in-itself—nevertheless constitutes an insurmountable challenge and promise, even though transcendental subjectivity is to be rejected. The true challenge is thus how such a normative vision can be realized and defended based on our contingent, historical situatedness (if it can be).

3. The fact that human agents are inescapably situated in social and cultural practices forces upon us an ethical reconstruction the need to take into account power and domination, i.e., forces which undercut normative attitudes, which subject, oppress, disempower, and generally instrumentalize and functionalize human subjects.

The following steps will be taken:

- Possible Paths: Hermeneutic Starting Points and the Legacy of Kant
- Phenomenological Accounts of Moral Attitudes: Levinas and Strawson
- The Empathetic Approach to a Universal Dialogic Ethics

1. Possible path (to articulate this project): Hermeneutic Presuppositions

To develop the *normative implications* of *hermeneutic interpretation* toward a full-blown philosophical ethic.

And to do so via a *hermeneutic social phenomenology* of the moral stance, which unfolds what is implicit in terms of a dialogic recognition in interpretation. This could show how such a stance entails moral respect for the universal and yet concretely situated Other. Gadamer pointed toward the *normative entailment* of hermeneutic interpretation:

"Hermeneutic experience is concerned with *tradition*… But tradition is not simply a process that experience teaches us to know and govern; it is language—i.e., it expresses itself like a Thou … Since interpretation is thus defined by the first- and second-person relation, it entails a *normative* dimension: "It is clear that the *experience of the Thou* must be special because the Thou is not an object but is in relationship with us. … Since here the object of experience is a person, this kind of experience is a moral phenomenon" (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 1989: 358)

This normative implication concretely means that

- The Other's expressions need to be *recognized and respected* as such. Respect via recognition is entailed in the dialogic situation since I have to relate the symbolic expressions of the Other to my own taken-to-be-true assumptions and values in order to even begin to make sense (*truth-projection*).

- Dialogic interpretation thus entails the projection of the Other as a rational and reflexive self (*rational reciprocity*).

- Hermeneutic recognition means that I never reduce the Other to her background, circumstances, social power, or other heteronomous factors, but always also address her own claims as potentially valid and meaningful (*non-reductionism*).

This hermeneutic scaffold already frames and guarantees that the internal application of empathetic acts—and projections—is undertaken within a context of a hermeneutic recognition of the Other as a rationally truth-oriented, equally reflexive, and contextually (power-defined) non-reducible agency/

2. The Kantian Legacy and its Predicaments

We owe Kant the classic formulation of moral obligation as an unconditional recognition of the Other as a human being with dignity:

"A human being regarded as a person, that is as the subject of a morally practical reason, … possesses a dignity … by which he exacts respect for himself from all other rational beings in the world … Humanity in his person is the object of the respect which he can demand from every other human being. " (Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Virtue)*

Kant's universal Maxim to establish such a dignified recognition is the famous *Moral Law,* which asserts its normative power and binding force as a *Categorical Imperative* on every subject as a member of humanity via its universality-guaranteeing law-like character.

There are several law-based formulations of the moral maxim, according to which the self acts as an *absolute law-giver* over her own realm of possibilities, which she learn to control and subject to her rational will.

> **"Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."** *Immanuel Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals[*

Yet Kant's universal aspiration is based upon a sharp divide between a *transcendental realm*— the kingdom of ends—and the *empirical realm*. If such a metaphysical divide between the transcendental and the empirical cannot be maintained, how can a universal morality possibly be reconstructed? How can the orientation towards the humanity of the Other as a self-determining agent—who is inescapably situated in contingent social, cultural, and historical contexts—be maintained and reconstructed?

I take inspiration from another formulation, the *'Respect-for-the-Humanity-in-the-Other formula.* Here, the fact that the Other is a rational subject with absolute human dignity defines the normative core of my *moral self-determination* who can thus never be made just the tool or means of my own projects and endeavors:

> **"Act in such a way that** *you treat humanit***y, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but** *always at the same time as an end."*
>
> *—Immanuel Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*

Within our hermeneutic framework, the orientation toward the self-determination of the Other becomes the recognition of her own, culturally situated self-understanding. Recognizing and understanding such self-understanding is *in concreto* filling out the *Ethical Imperative* to respect the humanity of the Other.

3. Toward a Social Phenomenology of Normative Attitudes

Yet if, as we assume, the transcendental path seems metaphysically problematic and burdened with a narrowing of the scope of ethics, a new path suggests itself: *hermeneutic social phenomenology*. To establish a universal moral standpoint in such a grounding requires to balance two dimensions (already operative in Kant):

(1) To radically strengthen *the self-reflective relation to one's own self* as a morally accountable agent, but to do so against *the Background* of an uncontrollable, holistic and complex socio-cultural world;

(2) To radically foreground the *normative indebtedness to the Other*, to make moral action be focused on doing justice to and respecting the Other as an infinitely valuable other self or being.

It is precisely in this regard that the *phenomenological* pathways toward the *Moral Standpoint* present themselves as the most viable option. They allow to reconstruct basic phenomena that point toward a groundedness of the moral standpoint within our socially situated, culturally defined, and historically changing beliefs and practices. As such, they adhere to the double-edged character that we defined as the core frame in both critical theory and hermeneutic phenomenology at the outset:

- To relate to the original morally relevant situations and the phenomena themselves to *reveal* 'sources of normativity.'

- To establish in the same breadth that the phenomena are embedded in socio-cultural practices and contexts that *distort, mask, cover, detract* from those sources, and that require tools for a critically reflective analysis of their reality.

The focus is thus on basic life-phenomena (*Lebensäußerungen* in Dilthey) as symbolic expressions of human agency, encompassing

- 'iconic' bodily expressions,
- actions within practices, and
- symbolically mediated intentional expressions (speech acts).

Levinas' Phenomenology of the Face

Levinas attempts to reveal how the immediacy of the encounter of the Other's face (as a complex *iconic* expression) presents us with an infinite source of concrete human reality as an irreducible inter-subjective and *morally obligatory* phenomenon.

"To manifest oneself as a face is to impose oneself above and beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form, to present oneself in a mode irreducible to manifestation, the very straightforwardness of the face to face without an intermediary of any image, in one's nudity that is, one's destitution and hunger."

(Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 200)

Both the Other's transcendence as a human (finite/infinite) subject and her concrete vulnerability are brought together here. This—prior to being culturally, symbolically, historically disclosed—*being-addressed* by the face puts a *moral demand* on me, grounding moral obligation prior to any significance within the cultural realm:

"It is not that there first would be the face, and then the being it manifests or expresses would concern himself with justice; *the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity*. The face in its nakedness as a face presents to me the destitution of the poor and the stranger; … To hear his destitution which cries out for justice is not to represent an image to oneself, but is to posit oneself *as responsible*." **(ibid., 213, 215)**

Levinas establishes *phenomenologically* that there exists *a uniquely intersubjective appeal*, a relation with a strong normative claim that is neither reducible to a *subjective expression* nor reconstructable as *a mediated representation* of some other fact existing prior to this very relation. Yet there are three problems:

- The Other becomes *the absolute Master and superior Other*—the *mutual reciprocity* entailed in the dialog-moral relation is shifted toward a self-subordinating position vis-à-vis the claims of the Other (ultimately grounded in the Other as exemplifying God, as in Levinas' Judaic background tradition).
- The *cultural and social pre-schematization* and (even implicit and habitual) objectification of the Other (and her face) as such-and-such is not taken into account. positing such a phenomenological immediacy ignores the *cultural and social pre-*

schematization (often implicit and habitual) objectification of the Other (and her face) which, for instance, deep *colonial socialization* may have established (see Frantz Fanon).

- The *normative recognition* seems directed as a 'naked' and absolutely vulnerable Other, *without including* in the ethical recognition the Other's self-identifying and identity-constituting Background, and her reflexive agency vis-à-vis that Background. Abstracting from the cultural imaginaries that define the self-understanding of the Other—so as to establish a *normative recognition* as 'naked' and vulnerable Other—precludes a hermeneutic recognition of these self-identifying and identity-constituting Background, as philosophical hermeneutics emphasizes. The power-defined schematization of perception (say via racial schemes) needs debunking and a cultivation of critical reflexivity; responsiveness to the vulnerability needs to take into account cultural and social self-interpretation and assumptions (hijab controversies; Mohamed cartoons, see Mahmoud)

We thus turn to a more 'agentive' and socially embedded approach to moral phenomena.

Strawson's Phenomenology of Reactive Moral Attitudes in the Lifeworld

Strawson reconstructs a *phenomenology of participants' reactive attitudes* that include a range of—ultimately irreducible and genuine—moral phenomena. A unique and irreducible realm of moral attitudes emerges within the participatory practices of our social lifeworld:

"I want to speak … of the non-detached (i.e., engaged, participatory, HHK) attitudes and reactions of people directly involved in transactions with each other; of the attitudes and reactions of offended parties and beneficiaries; of such things as gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, and hurt feelings." (P.F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment*, 1974, 5)

Analyzing these phenomena reveals an *implicit normative infrastructure* such that a unique level of *responsiveness* and *expectation* is added above any purely physical pain or discomfort:

"If someone treads on my hand by accident, while trying to help me, the pain may be no less acute than if he treads on it in contemptuous disregard of my existence or with a malevolent wish to injure me. But I shall generally feel in the second case a kind of degree of resentment that I shall not feel in the first … [in] kinds of reactive attitudes and feelings … we demand some degree of goodwill or regard on the part of those who stand in these relationships to us." (ibid., 6/7)

Several normative truths are thus coming into view:

1. The attitude within which alone those experiences can emerge and be had is defined by a *uniquely involved and participatory stance* that cannot be reduced or accounted for in an objectively detached mode of theorizing.
2. The participatory attitude allows for exceptions, as when ignorance, illusion, or other psychologically explainable distortions enter the account of a particular act or expression. These exceptional cases can account for a change in the blameworthiness of the act, but:
3. They nevertheless do not challenge **our general approach to the Other as a morally accountable agent** *(to whom some goodwill towards us is attributed) as such;*

The overall scheme of moral attitudes

- **The initial, basic 'reactive attitude'** may have seemed 'simple,' in the sense of an immediately given primary phenomenon; However, even seeing yourself as a target that *deserves* some 'good will'—as in the most basic re-active stance—we detect a taken-the-perspective-of-another-towards-yourself.

- **The projective attitude** in which you understand *that another may be morally wronged* depends on *seeing yourself as another self,* and as such to be vulnerable vis-à-vis mis-recognizing attitudes, acts, and beliefs. You can only conceive of the Other as deserving the same respect that you felt *by projecting or 'constructing' the Other as a self like yourself*. Responses or reactions to the conduct of others include how they should have behaved, i.e., judging or assigning blame, also praise, including moral indignation, contempt, disapproval, moral criticism, blame.

  "They are reactions to the qualities of others' wills, not towards ourselves, but towards others. … What we have here is, as it were, resentment *on behalf of another*, where one's own interest and dignity are not involved; and it is this impersonal or vicarious character of the attitude … which entitle it to the qualification 'moral.' (ibid., 15)

- **The reflexive attitude**. Here I explicitly address myself as a target or subject of the blameworthiness of the projective attitude now applied to myself. I somewhat return to myself. In a kind of *self-empathy*, it addresses oneself as a distinct, responsible, morally accountable self—*someone who*, like everyone else and like we do vis-à-vis everyone else—can be held accountable for her acts and attitudes.

"Phenomena as feeling bound, or obliged (the 'sense of obligation'): feeling compunction; feeling guilty or remorseful or at least responsible; and the more complicated phenomenon of shame." (ibid., 16)

- **The generalizing attitude** is dependent on this prior 'direct' or 'inter-personal' *empathetic identification* of the projective attitude in which we hold others accountable, from which it 'moves up' to expand and generalizes *to everyone else as such*. It is thus based on empathy albeit in a more generalizable manner; by expanding beyond one's own self as a center and assuming the other's position as the one who has been mistreated, one opens the range of moral feelings here to *a universal standpoint:*

"[Reactive attitudes, HHK] rest on, or reflect, that is, the demand for the manifestation of a reasonable degree of goodwill or regard, on the part of others, not simply towards oneself, but towards all those on whose behalf moral indignation may be felt, i.e., *as we now think, towards all men [human beings]***."**

The universalizing moral stance would in this logic imply a gradual or expansive generalization from the initial projective stance towards an inclusion of all agents.

Problems:

1) The discussion of objectifying and reifying inhibitions of moral phenomena is not complete—it is focused solely on particular exceptions or the overall scientific 'objectifying attitude.' This leaves out the functionally objectifying attitudes that already emerge from within the (modern) lifeworld itself and pose much more of a threat to moral relations.
2) The discussion barely mentions, and does not sufficiently address, cultural differences;
3) It somewhat naively identifies the projective (empathetic) stance with a universalizing empathetic stance. But how we are able *to ascend or emerge from our concretely embedded and mediated empathetic identifications with Others towards a fully universal projective stance—the moral standpoint as such* is far from clear.

Yet we established now that an *empathetic perspective-taking* underlies the moral phenomenology of the lifeworld, and that the underlying perspective-taking is also fused together with *normative expectations* vis-à-vis the conduct of the Other, and in turn vis-à-vis of oneself.

I want to now explicate the socio-ontological assumptions underlying a respective account of the dialog self which could sustain such an approach (provide the 'can' for the 'ought,' and then spell out several normative implications.

4. Grounding Empathetic Normativity in the Dialogical Self

Hermeneutic social phenomenology takes its cue from an *intuitive concept of reflexive agency* (similar to Korsgaard) which it aims to articulate in its fruitfulness for critical social theory. Assumed is a notion of an irreducible self-relation, a sense of self that uniquely *understands* its own agency as such (what Heidegger names *Jemeinigkeit* or Mead designated as the "I," also Kierkegaard). Agency entails the consciousness of oneself (as self), the capacity of intentional causation, and the capacity to distinguish between one's own effects and features determined by the world. Yet no essential core- or immediate self, no Cartesian *pure mind* is presupposed, but rather the potential for a reflexive attitude and creative transformation of what has already been there, of what has hitherto been and become. Thus, *social situatedness* (and with it the issues of the media of such as language, the body, and power relations) is a *relational and foundational* concept. The self exists as a projection of such-and-such only against the background of pre-given practices and structures. From this, the dialectical nature of an agency emerges: that it is both self- and socially 'determined,' that it exists as a constant tension and challenge between its own autonomous self-understanding and the conditions that, more or less, enable it to do so.

In order to articulate this more fully, we can draw on a *developmental account of the self* which is to show how certain crucial *cognitive capabilities* are formative in establishing a *reflexive self-relation but that can also detect modes of power and domination in order to resist them.*[1] Guiding ideas come from G.H. Mead (and recent authors like Paul Harris, Alex Gillespie, Samuel Fleischacker, etc.).

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[1] Other than in Nussbaum, the aim is not (just) a list to connect normative values to actual capacities, but to reconstruct from the 'can' how specific types of normative orientations –the oughts'—follow or are made possible.

- The self is structural defined by *imaginative perspective-taking*, i.e., a self develops as a distinct and conscious 'object' if it can see or understand itself from the perspective of another (self), by 'taking-the-attitude-of-the-other.'

- Developmentally, there is a basic 'intuitive' stage of play, an immersed in social roles and their scripts.

- There follows a reflexive rule-following approach in which the roles are seen as interchangeable, thus that the position of a subject following general rules—seeing itself from the perspective of a *Generalized Other*—becomes possible.

The reflexive self emerges from embedded situations in which it develops it(s) self dia-logically, i.*e., in constant exchange with other agents*. This self-conception is thus deeply socially constructed and 'embedded,' and yet accounts for an intrinsic reflexivity in that the self only exists via its self-thematization (from the perspective of an Other whose attitude it takes toward herself). Here the distinction between a shared and holistically acquired Background of assumptions and practices define **"Me"** (the 'me' in Mead) whereas the capacity to transcend and transform the social self by what **"I"** do, feel, and think (the 'I' in Mead) always remains present and a possibility.

"Kögler suggests that the very notion of a perspective is a linguistic one, and that even our awareness of our own perspective –our self-consciousness—should be understood as 'reflexive' and 'dialogical.' In self-consciousness, we are always engaged in 'a dialogue with [ourselves],' a relationship between 'I' as [a] thinking self to 'me' as the 'object' of my reflection. Thus, 'the very possibility of self-knowledge [is] derived from a socially shared and intersubjective source.' …this entails that other people can help figure out who exactly I am: I never have an 'absolutely privileged position vis-à-vis the meanings that make up [my own] sense of self.' (Fleischacker 2019, 44)

Self-relations thus do not lack a unique focal point of self-reference, but their substantive conceptions and self-understandings are intrinsically other-related, structurally open-ended and never finite, and "culturally mediated" from the get-go. Research on the implications and structure of empathy as perspective-taking involves a set of distinctions and insights leading preparing for more complex notion of empathic recognition.

- The stance can be intuitive, as a felt-projected immersion, or more of a theoretical-conceptual construction (simulation versus theory theory).

- The more distinct the Other's social and cultural contexts are, the more discursive concepts and mediations must be inserted (basic versus reflexive empathy).

- The perspective-taking can be self-oriented—I project myself in the Other's situation—or Other-oriented—I make sure I understand the Other as Other and therefrom reconstruct her experiential horizon.

- Finally, the situation evaluation can be aimed at from the Other's symbolic order or vis-à-vis a universal standard, as the self becomes capable of assuming a *universal perspective* via a generalizing of the participant's situated perspective and roles.

This last step is controversial in how it is possible or how it can be reconstructed: As a gradual emergence of a 'higher' or 'transcendent' perspective onto moral issues or as an immediate access to a transcendental or ideal realm of ideas, a 'kingdom of ends.' In the dialogic perspective, as we will see, the gradual emergence is aimed for and connected to the *practical-educational development of such an attitude in the actual situated subjects in concrete dialogues and interactions.*

5. Normative Implications of the Empathetic Ethics of Dialogic Recognition

On the basis of this account of a dialogic self, several *value-orientations* can be derived that are both grounded in actual social-psychological processes and define normative ideals that justify the claim that a hermeneutic appropriation of the Kantian promise of a universal and egalitarian respect for human dignity has been provided. Such a reconstruction builds on the anti-instrumental dimension of respecting one another always as ends and never merely as means, but transforms it based on our social situatedness emphasizing the mutually binding and recognizing dialogic nature of selves.

I. Ontological Debt toward the Other

The fact that we inescapably depend on others in order to constitute our-selves grounds an ontological debt toward others. Since it to others that we largely 'owe' who we are, we are held to recognize them as invaluable dimensions of our existence. Inasmuch as we are capable of recognizing ourselves as a self by taking the perspective of the Other toward ourselves, and inasmuch this assumes the stance of the other as non-objectifiable subject, not as external or physical object, we owe to the other the recognition of an infinitely transcendent and yet present

other. A social world that enables a dignified existence (as grounded and defined by practices and institutions oriented toward or at least constrained by ideals of human dignity) is thus a world in which agents are thusly recognized.

But under dialogical conditions, this recognition does not amount to an unconditional acceptance of the Other's claim; the Other's claim-making status is unconditionally respected, but not the concrete expressions or acts. Those stand under the condition of mutual criticizability, the epistemic humility on the side of the subject is complemented by the reflexive accountability of also concede errors and flaws on the side of the Other.

II.   Epistemic Orientation toward the Other's Cultural Self-Understanding

Since the orientation toward the Other is defined not be a self-transposing empathy, which would remain self-centered, but by a de-centering other-oriented transposition into the Other's perspective, including the symbolic, cultural background assumptions and social practices, the value-orientation here is defined by recognizing how the Other understands her-, him- or them-self. Recognition of the Other's situatedness. This involves a reflexive awareness of the dynamics involved in hermeneutic and cultural appropriation. The empathetic transposition into other contexts is able to transcend artificially imposed limits on one's understanding, but also encounters symbolic, cognitive, cultural, social, and institutional limits which have to be consciously integrated into the process of understanding.

Here, to name one issue, the reflexive awareness and criticism of self-transparency needs to be emphasized. The declared will to overcome prejudices does not do so. Habits of cognitive socialization will likely provide a more enduring influence on one's pre-assumptions, one's pre-understanding in terms of a cultural and aesthetic habitus. But the inverse thesis of a totally closed of world of social or cultural habitus-formations, like social monads, is equally untenable. The imaginative perspective-taking invokes the promise to gradually expand one's horizon vis-à-vis those of hitherto un-recognized others.

The capacity of empathetic perspective-taking could play a decisive role here in three aspects.

- First, it is itself needed to approach other traditions so as to not merely assimilate them to our own (or 'Western') preconceptions.

- Second, it could explore the concepts and thematic analysis of processes of empathy and perspective-taking as relevant within these other traditions.

- Third, as cultural traditions are themselves universally mediated by practices of appropriating their texts, art works, ritualistic practices, etc., the reconstruction of what such a hermeneutic appropriation entails promises to reveal that certain shared cognitive processes of empathetic understanding are at work here.

III.   Recognition of the Other's situated (mediated) yet universal Cognitive Capacities

The reconstructed capacity to ascend from particular role-playing to a more generalized stage of rule-following—which has incorporated the switch of particular role-assignments and grants equals status to role immersion—testifies to universally shared, trans-concrete-role defined cognitive capacities. Yet as those rules will still, due to the situatedness of the social subject, be inescapably subject to also contextual groundings, interpretations, and application histories, the normative reality of such norms cannot be hypostatized into a distinct realm of an 'kingdom of ends,' a metaphysically defined realm of real values, a theologically or theo-philosophical defined realms of the transcendent pure ideas, the Dao, Nirvana, God, etc. The transcending force of a universal normativity makes itself felt in its critical and rejecting response to power- and domination-defined exclusions, oppressions, and denigrations. The 'anticipation of rational competence' (redefined after Gadamer) secures that we never objectify the Other toward being a deterministically defined product of any social or otherwise status, to reduce the subject to her 'what' and deny her being 'who' she is—which is always being beyond what she is.

The recognition of this universality achieves its power through respect for the particular culture, religious, and social practices and traditions within a subject is embedded, and by means of which he, she, or they define their identity. But it should also be clear that no such pre-assured respect denies the possibility and need for a deconstructive and critical approach toward such worldview, religions, and ideological systems that deny and denigrate precisely these cognitive universals and particular recognitions to culturally situated agents. The hermeneutic approach to

empathic ethical recognition, is, as we stated before, intrinsically tied to the critical analysis of symbolic and practical forms of domination in violation of ethical recognition.

Since the gradual ascendence to a shared higher realm is grounded in concrete perspective-taking, from which it (so to speak) takes off, empathic ethics retains both a sense of the concrete socio-cultural life-worlds of the agents (their background self-understanding remains active as a source of motivational and experiential input), but is also connected to the constraints and limitations that impinge themselves on the vulnerable, power-defined agents.

The cognitive capacities grounded in the dialogic self—which is itself the result of ongoing empathetic perspective-taking—enable the reflexive awareness of

- One's debt to others
- The concrete empathetic recognition of cultural self-understandings
- The gradual ascension to a shared universal set of norms, as well as
- The entailments of power and domination in our pre-understandings.

They help realize an ethics based on empathy via a critically reflexive cultural understanding.