

On the limits of empathy: A conceptual framework and some transcendental considerations

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Summary: 1. The concept of «empathy». 2. Kinds of «limits» of empathy. 3. Absolute limits of mental perspective-taking. 3.1. Absolute limiting conditions. 3.2. Absolute outcome limitations. 4. Conclusions.

Abstract: In the scientific literature, the notion of “limits of empathy” is referred to in a large variety of different senses. This variety is partly due to the notorious ambiguities concerning the concept of “empathy” and partly to different ways of understanding the “limits” of what is referred to by this concept. This essay aims to sketch a conceptual framework that allows to capture basic broad kinds of meanings associated with the notion of “limits of empathy”, and on this basis to explore more deeply a specific kind of “limit” concerning a particular understanding of “empathy”, namely the absolute limits of mental perspective-taking. This specific kind of “limits of empathy” is particularly important for conceptualizations of “limits of empathy” in general because it refers to limits concerning any mental representation of other individuals’ subjective worlds. It is argued that a promising approach to identifying these limits can be developed on the ground of the semiotic phenomenology that results from Charles S. Peirce’s systematic critique of Kant’s transcendental philosophy.

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representation, imaginability, conceivability.

In the scientific literature, the notion of “limits of empathy” (expressed in these or analogous terms) is referred to in numerous fields of research and in a large variety of different senses. To illustrate, a search on Google Scholar in May 2023 produced more than 2.100 scientific publications (i.e., books, book chapters, journal articles, etc.) that refer to the phrase “limits of empathy” somewhere in the text, with more than 50 of them containing that reference in the title. Of these latter publications, already the twenty that were deemed most relevant by the Google Scholar algorithm are from more than ten different fields of research, including art history (e.g., Koss 2006), economics (e.g., Waytz 2016), medical ethics (e.g., Smajdor et al. 2011), philosophy (e.g., Marder 2012), social psychology (e.g., Fuchs 2019), psychoanalysis (e.g., Poland 2007), museology (e.g., Schultz 2023), animal studies (e.g., Sands 2019), literary studies (e.g., Gauthier 2013), design (e.g., Holt 2011), ethnic and migration studies (Turkoglu et al. 2022), and film studies (Watson 2010). Not surprisingly, these publications refer to the phrase “limits of empathy” in substantially different senses, partly depending on the field of research to which they contribute.

In general, the variety of senses in which the notion of “limits of empathy” is referred to in the scientific literature is due not only to the notorious ambiguities of the concept of “empathy”, but also to different ways of understanding the “limits” of what is referred to by this concept. In the following, I will therefore first distinguish between basic kinds of meanings that the term “empathy” has come to assume in the scientific literature, and then consider basic kinds of “limits” concerning empathy. On this basis, I will finally more deeply explore a particular kind of limits concerning a particular understanding of empathy namely the “absolute” limits of “mental perspective-taking”.

1. The concept of «empathy»

The term “empathy” was introduced into the English language as a translation of the German term “Einfühlung”, which literally means “feeling (oneself) into”, as in projecting oneself into someone or something else. Both the German term and its English adaptation have a complex history that reflects the different meanings and connotations they assumed in the different theoretical contexts in which they have been used, thereby sometimes eclipsing, distorting, or even completely abandoning the literal meaning of “Einfühlung” in German. Instead of reviewing this complex history (see Maibom 2017, part II; Stueber 2006), I will limit myself to exploring what, if anything, contemporary conceptualizations of empathy have in common and in which basic ways they differ. On this basis, I will then define the conceptualization on which I will later focus.

A seemingly promising attempt to identify a common core of similarity between the various definitions of empathy has been made by Hodges and Myers (2007) in their entry on “Empathy” in the *Encyclopedia of Social Psychology*. According to them, “most definitions share the idea of one person’s response to his or her perceptions of another person’s current experience” (p. 296). This characterization does indeed point at an important common feature of most social-psychological definitions of empathy, but it also involves potential limitations in each of its parts, which are partly due to the authors’ disciplinary focus on social psychology. First, like many other broad definitions of empathy, it is somewhat limited in that it conceives empathy as a relation between “one person” and “another person”. In fact, conceptualizations of empathy that refer to “persons”, “people” or “we/us” tend to exclude empathy by and for individuals other than human beings, thus neglecting the growing body of research on empathy by or for animals (e.g., Preston & De Waal 2002; Young et al. 2018), plants (Hall 2022), or even artefacts such as robots (e.g., Asada 2015; Kwak 2013). Second, conceiving empathy as a “response” might suggest passivity on the part of the empathizer, while empathy may also be understood as an active and deliberate process, as when trying to understand someone. In fact, the German term “Einfühlung”, based on which the English term “empathy”

was coined, literally refers to an active rather than passive process. Third, rather than as a “response to (a person’s) perception” of another individual’s mental life, empathy may also be conceived as what renders this perception possible. In fact, this seems to be the view of Edith Stein and other philosophers in the phenomenological tradition (cf. Jardine & Szanto 2017). Fourth, conceiving empathy as a response to an individual’s “perception” of another individual involves the risk of excluding empathy for individuals that are not sensorily perceived but only remembered, imagined, or otherwise mentally represented. Fifth, conceiving empathy as a response to an individual’s perception of another individual’s “current experience” excludes empathy for mental states that are not currently experienced. Finally, empathy need not be supposed to be about other individuals’ mental lives at all. Historically, in fact, the concept of empathy was first introduced in the scientific literature to describe and explain the aesthetic appreciation of artworks and thus targeted entities that were not supposed to have a mental life of their own.

This critical analysis of Hodges and Myers’ (2007) attempt to identify a common core of similarity between the various contemporary definitions of empathy illustrates that it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to define a general meaning of empathy. Instead of trying to identify core features of empathy in general, it might therefore be more promising to describe basic dimensions of variability on which contemporary conceptualizations of empathy differ.

In a recent review of the concept of “empathy”, Cuff et al. (2016) identified eight “areas of confusion”, i.e., “themes crucial for our understanding of [empathy]” that are differently addressed in contemporary conceptualizations of empathy. Though not explicitly intended as such, these eight thematic areas describe dimensions of variability on which conceptualizations of empathy differ and in terms of which it is possible to define different concepts of empathy and their relationship to each other and to associated concepts. In the following I will briefly reconceptualize the eight thematic areas as dimensions of variability and then introduce the concept of empathy that I will focus on later, by defining it in terms of these dimensions.

- *Overarching or specific?*

Some conceptualizations differentiate empathy from associated concepts such as sympathy, compassion, or emotional contagion, whereas others understand empathy as an overarching category that contains some, most, or all of them. If empathy is conceived as an overarching concept, the concepts contained in it can be considered as different “kinds” of empathy that can be distinguished in terms of the following dimensions.

- *Cognitive or affective?*

Empathy may be conceived as a primarily cognitive process that allows to mentally represent the mental life of another individual, or as a primarily affective process that involves an emotional response on the part of the empathizer to the mental life of the empathizee (the individual that is empathized with). Accordingly, a basic distinction between different kinds of empathy is between “cognitive empathy” and “affective (or emotional) empathy” (e.g., Hodges & Myers 2007; Maibom 2017b; Maibom 2017c).

- *Congruent or incongruent?*

Empathic emotions experienced by the empathizer may be congruent or incongruent with the emotions experienced by the empathizee. Some conceptualizations of empathy emphasize the importance of emotional congruency, whereas for others such congruency is not necessary. Based on the latter kind of conceptualizations, it is possible to distinguish between basic kinds of “affective empathy”, characterized by whether or not there is such congruency (e.g., Maibom 2017b, 2017c).

- *Direct perception?*

Empathy may be conceived as a process that does or does not require direct perception of the empathizee. Many conceptualizations assume that the empathizer must directly perceive the empathizee, whereas others allow for empathy by other means such as imagination, memory, or inference.

- *Causal awareness?*

Empathy may be conceived as a process that does or does not require that the empathizer is aware that their own emotional experience is a response to the empathizee's emotional experience. Conceptualizations that differentiate empathy from "emotional contagion" emphasize the importance of this awareness, whereas conceptualizations that also contain "emotional contagion" do not require such awareness.

- *State influences?*

Conceptualizations of empathy may focus exclusively on stable trait influences, by referring to an empathic "ability" or "capacity", or recognize the importance of state influences, by emphasizing the role of "context" or "situation".

- *Behavioral outcome?*

Conceptualizations of empathy differ in whether empathy is supposed to be associated with a behavioral outcome. Most conceptualizations, however, do not require that empathy necessarily has an associated behavioral outcome, at least not immediately.

- *"Automatic or controlled?"*

Empathy may be conceived as a process that is automatically elicited or subject to control. Accordingly, an important distinction between different kinds of empathy is between "automatic empathy" and "intentional empathy".

By differently combining positions on these eight dimensions of variability it is possible to define a large number of different concepts of empathy. Notably, however, the eight dimensions are not completely independent from each other, in so far as a given kind of position on one dimension may determine or presuppose a specific kind of position on another. Three kinds of interdependencies are particularly relevant. First, the more differential and less overarching empathy is conceived on the first dimension, the more this

conceptualization determines specific kinds of positions on the other seven dimensions. Second, any kind of position on the dimensions of “congruency” and “causal awareness” presupposes that empathy is conceived as an essentially (though not necessarily exclusively) affective process, because both dimensions concern the relation between the emotions of the empathizer, on the one hand, and the empathizee, on the other. Third, conceiving empathy as a process that requires “causal awareness” presupposes that empathy is conceived as an essentially (though not necessarily exclusively) cognitive process, because distinguishing between oneself and another individual is a cognitive process. These and other interdependencies substantially reduce the number of possible concepts of empathy and thus, in case of overarching conceptualizations, of possible “kinds” of empathy.

For the sake of terminological convenience, I adopt in this essay an overarching conceptualization of empathy and consider the various concepts of empathy as different kinds of empathy. In the last part of in this essay, I will focus on a specific kind of empathy that plays a particularly important role in conceptualizations of empathy, namely mental perspective-taking. Mental perspective-taking differs from spatial perspective-taking in that it does not aim at mentally representing what oneself would perceive from another spatial perspective, but what another individual is, was, will be, or would be experiencing (perceiving, feeling, thinking, etc.) from their own spatiotemporal psychological perspective. In other words, it aims at mentally representing the subjective worlds of other individuals. Mental perspective-taking plays a particularly important role in conceptualizations of empathy for at least four reasons. First, mental perspective-taking is conceptually closer than other kinds of empathy to the literal meaning of the German term “Einfühlung”, which literally means “feeling (oneself) into”, as in projecting oneself into someone or something else. Second, empathy is often explicitly defined in terms of mental perspective-taking. Third, mental perspective-taking is included in most, if not all, broader conceptualization of empathy. Fourth, mental perspective-taking is implicitly supposed or involved in many other kinds of empathy, viz. in all those kinds that involve mentally representing the mental life of other individuals, because it is one of the possible ways in which such representations

can be acquired. Accordingly, mental perspective-taking can be considered as a specific kind of cognitive empathy. As regards the other dimensions of conceptual variability, mental perspective-taking does not require congruency between the emotions experienced by the empathizer and the empathizee, nor does it require direct perception of the empathizee, but it does require the empathizer's awareness of the difference and causal relation between his or her own emotions and those of the empathizee. Furthermore, it may be influenced by both stable traits and contextual or situational factors, it need not necessarily have an immediate behavioral outcome, and it may be an automatic as well as a controlled process.

2. Kinds of «limits» of empathy

The “limits” referred to in scientific publications on “limits of empathy” are still much more manifold than the processes denoted therein as “empathy”. Nevertheless, these manifold limits may be systematically classified into a limited number of broad kinds defined in terms of the following distinctions:

- *Conceptual vs. actual limits*

Most basically, reference to limits of empathy can denote either conceptual or actual limits. Conceptual limits of empathy are limits concerning the theoretical relevance and value of the *concept* of empathy. For example, it may be argued that the concept of empathy is of limited value in explaining aesthetic experience or in grounding an adequate moral theory. Actual limits of empathy, by contrast, are limits concerning the *ability or process* of empathy itself. For example, one may ask in how far the ability or process of empathy is limited due to certain individual or environmental conditions. The following distinctions will all concern such actual limits of empathy.

- *Relative vs. absolute limits*

Actual limits of empathy can be either relative limits or absolute limits.

Relative limits of empathy are limits concerning specific instances, or specific kinds of instances, of empathy, whereas absolute limits of empathy are limits concerning all mentally representable instances of empathy, i.e., all instances of empathy that can be imagined, conceived, or in some other way mentally represented.² Absolute limits of empathy thus abstract as much as possible from who empathizes, who is empathized with, and when, where, and why an individual empathizes with another. As all empirical instances of empathy are specific instances of empathy, the distinction between relative and absolute limits of empathy overlaps with the distinction between empirical and transcendental limits of empathy.

- *Limiting conditions vs. outcome limitations*

Both relative and absolute limits can be either limiting conditions of empathy (i.e., conditions that limit empathy) or outcome limitations of empathy (i.e., limitations concerning the outcome of empathy), depending on whether the genitive phrase “limits of empathy” is understood as an objective genitive or as a subjective genitive. Limiting conditions and outcome limitations of empathy are often related in so far as limiting conditions can result in outcome limitations. For example, autism spectrum disorder is a limiting condition of empathy that can result in limited empathic behavior. However, limiting conditions and outcome limitations of empathy need not necessarily be linked. On the one hand, in fact, limiting conditions of empathy (e.g., societal restraints) need not necessarily lead to limited outcomes of empathy (e.g., empathic behavior), but may be ignored or compensated. On the other hand, outcome limitations of empathy (e.g., limited therapeutical effects) need not be due to limiting conditions of empathy (e.g., lack of motivation on the part of a therapist), but may be limited due to other causes (e.g., a patient’s defense mechanisms) or with respect to some ideal standard (e.g., the therapist’s expectations).

2 For reasons that will be illustrated later, I use the term “mentally representable” in the sense of the German term “vorstellbar” as a generic term that comprises imaginable and conceivable as two more specific terms.

- *Internal vs. external limits*

Both the limiting conditions and the outcome limitations of empathy can be either internal or external to the empathizer. Internal limiting conditions are limiting physiological or psychological characteristics of the empathizer (e.g., autism spectrum disorder), whereas external limiting conditions are limiting characteristics of the empathizer's environment (e.g., societal restraints), including characteristics of the empathizee (e.g., having another cultural background than the empathizer). Analogously, internal outcome limitations concern the physiological or psychological states and processes of the empathizer (e.g., limited empathic understanding), whereas external outcome limitations concern the empathizer's empathic behavior (e.g., limited empathic care) and its effects on the empathizee and on the empathizer's environment in general.

- *Ability-related vs. motivational limits*

The limiting conditions of empathy include ability-related and motivational conditions, which may both be internal or external to the empathizer. Ability-related limits of empathy are internal or external limitations concerning the empathizer's ability to mentally represent the mental life of another individual, or to emotionally respond to that mental life. Motivational limits of empathy are limitations concerning the empathizer's intrinsic or extrinsic motivation to implement these abilities.

- *Cognitive vs. emotional limits*

Corresponding to the distinction between the ability to mentally represent the mental life of another individual and the ability to emotionally respond to that mental life, the outcome limitations of empathy include limitations concerning cognitive and emotional outcomes, which may both be internal or external. Cognitive limits of empathy are limitations concerning the internal (i.e., mental) or external (e.g., orally expressed) representation of another individual's mental life, whereas emotional limits are limitations concerning the empathizer's internal (i.e., subjectively experienced) or external (i.e., behaviorally expressed)

emotional response to that mental life.

The distinctions listed above may be considered as dimensions of variability concerning conceptualization of “limits” referred to in scientific publications on “limits of empathy”. Together with the dimensions of variability concerning conceptualization of empathy, they provide a conceptual structure that allows to classify the manifold senses in which the notion of “limits of empathy” is referred to in the scientific literature. It is beyond the scope of this, and indeed any, essay to systematically implement such a classification. In the last part of this essay, I will instead describe a specific kind of “limits of empathy”, which is particularly important for understanding the “limits of empathy” in general, namely the absolute limits of mental perspective-taking. This specific kind of “limits of empathy” is particularly important because the absolute limits of mental perspective-taking concern all conceivable instances of mental perspective-taking and because, as mentioned in the previous part of this essay, mental perspective-taking plays a particularly important role in conceptualizations of empathy in general.

3. Absolute limits of mental perspective-taking

Mental perspective-taking aims at mentally representing the subjective perspectives of other individuals, i.e., what other individuals are, were, will be, or would be experiencing (perceiving, feeling, thinking, etc.) from their own spatiotemporal psychological perspective. In other words, it aims at mentally representing the subjective worlds of other individuals. Accordingly, limits of mental perspective-taking denote limits concerning the mental representation of other subjective worlds, and *absolute* limits of mental perspective-taking denote limits concerning any such representation. Now, analogous to “limits of empathy” in general, “absolute limits of mental perspective-taking” can denote two different kinds of limits, depending on whether the genitive phrase is understood as an objective genitive or as a subjective genitive. Specifically, they can denote either *absolute limiting conditions*, i.e., conditions that limit any

process of mentally representing other subjective worlds, or *absolute outcome limitations*, i.e., limitations concerning any outcome of such processes.

3.1. *Absolute limiting conditions*

Analogous to “limits of empathy” in general, the absolute limiting conditions of mental perspective-taking can be either *internal* or *external* to the perspective-taker. The internal conditions concern the representational abilities of the perspective-taker, whereas the external conditions concern the perspective-taker’s environment, including the individuals whose perspective is to be taken. As absolute limiting conditions, both kinds of conditions must apply to any mentally representable perspective-taker in any mentally representable environment. Strictly, therefore, both kinds of conditions can be identified only once have been identified the characteristics of any mentally representable world, in general, and of any representable *subjective* world, in particular (see section 3.2). Nevertheless, the following observations concerning a specific kind of perspective-taker, namely human beings, might help to illustrate what these conditions can be like.

As regards the internal limiting conditions, the representational abilities of human beings concern basically two kinds of mental representations: picture-like representations, including sensations, percepts, and mental images; and language-like representations, including mental concepts and propositions (Pitt 2022). Accordingly, human beings have basically two ways of mentally representing other subjective worlds: by imagination, i.e., by varying (e.g., combining, dividing, etc.) picture-like mental representations, or by conception, i.e., by varying language-like mental representations. Both ways of mentally representing other subjective worlds are constrained by their experiential basis, i.e., by the picture-like or language-like mental representations on which they operate. This experiential basis is itself determined by internal conditions such as the human sensory modalities, including both external senses (vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch) and internal senses (e.g., balance, proprioception, pain, interoception), as well as various kinds of cognitive abilities (e.g., mnestic, epistemic, linguistic abilities).

Both, the two ways of mentally representing other subjective worlds and the experiential basis on which they operate, are influenced by various kinds of external limiting conditions, including the kinds of environmental stimuli that have so far affected the external senses, the availability of informal and formal knowledge representation systems, and characteristics concerning the empathizee. As regards the latter, it seems in fact not unlikely that not only human beings but any mentally representable empathizer would generally tend the more to consider other individuals as conscious subjects and to mentally represent their worlds, the more these individuals are similar to the empathizers themselves. In any case, however, the human ability to mentally represent other subjective worlds is constrained within limits defined by what is imaginable, on the one hand, and conceivable, on the other. In human beings, imagination and conception are thus limiting conditions concerning the way in which other subjective worlds are represented, while imaginability and conceivability are limiting conditions concerning the contents of such representations.

Notably, imaginability and conceivability are not only two conceptually different kinds of mental representability,³ but they also have different limits, i.e., they do not comprise the same states of affairs. On the one hand, in fact, there are states of affairs that are conceivable but not imaginable (e.g., additional dimensions of space), whereas on the other hand there are states of affairs that are imaginable but perhaps not adequately conceivable (e.g., the smell of a rose). The latter depends on the much-debated question whether the phenomenal content of picture-like representations such as mental images can be reduced to the intentional content of language-like representations such as mental concepts and propositions. Thus, reference to conceivability allows to define limits of imaginability, while reference to imaginability allows to define limits of conceivability if the phenomenal content of what can be imagined cannot be reduced to the intentional content of what can be conceived.

Given that any supposed subjective world must be characterized by at least those general characteristics that characterize all mentally representable

3 The distinction between imaginability and conceivability is analogous to the German distinction between “intuitively representable” (*anschaulich vorstellbar*) and “conceptually representable” (*begrifflich vorstellbar*) as two kinds of “mental representability” (*Vorstellbarkeit*).

subjective worlds, this view of the limiting conditions of human mental perspective-taking implies that the difference between representing the subjective world of another human being and that of any other kind of individuals is only gradual and concerns the degree to which the characteristics of their worlds can be imagined rather than only conceived. In fact, even if it is impossible for blind human beings to adequately imagine the subjective worlds of their seeing conspecifics, because they lack the important sensorial and perceptual modality of sight, it is still possible for them to conceive the characteristics of that world, i.e., to conceptually approach what that world is like. Analogously, the same is true for normal human beings attempting to take the mental perspectives of individuals with radically different sensorial and perceptual modalities (e.g., bats; see Nagel 1980).⁴

3.2. *Absolute outcome limitations*

Absolute outcome limitations of mental perspective-taking denote limitations concerning the outcomes of *any* process of mentally representing other subjective worlds. Now, analogous to empathy in general, mental perspective-taking need not necessarily have a behavioral outcome. Therefore, only *internal* outcome limitations can be absolute, i.e., only limitations concerning the mental representations themselves that are the outcomes of processes of representing other subjective worlds. Such limitations can concern both the content of such representations and the way it is represented. Accordingly, the absolute outcome limitations of mental perspective-taking can concern both the characteristics of any mentally representable subjective

4 Perhaps even more telling examples come from science and literature. In fact, having developed a higher-dimensional geometry, human beings are now able to conceive how a higher-dimensional world would appear from a specific perspective within that world, even though they remain unable to imagine it. Analogously, if the living Triangles in the two-dimensional world of Edwin A. Abbot's novel *Flatland* had developed a higher-dimensional geometry, they would have been able to conceive how their world appeared in the three-dimensional subjective world of the living Sphere who invaded it, even though they remained unable to image that world.

world and the way in which these characteristics can be represented.

The characteristics of any mentally representable subjective world can be understood as perspectival and subjective specifications of the characteristics of any mentally representable world in general. Identifying the latter can therefore be a first step to identifying the former. To the best of my knowledge, the by far most convincing approach to identifying the characteristics of any mentally representable world in general is the one sketched in the works of the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce. He originally identified some of these characteristics in the context of a systematic critique of Kant's transcendental philosophy, which aimed at realizing Kant's transcendental project more consistently than Kant himself had done.⁵ This critique resulted in a radically phenomenological paradigm and in a "new list of categories" that describes the characteristics of any innerworldly "being". Peirce originally identified these "categories" by means of what I call a "recursively-transcendental" operation which starts from the concept of "being", understood as a phenomenologically reduced equivalent of Kant's "I think", and which consists in identifying the "condition of validity" or "immediate justification and condition of the introduction" of the category identified last.⁶ Later in his life, Peirce backed up his original findings by direct phenomenological analyses of the "phaneron". In any case, both methods lead to identifying essentially the same three "categories", which Peirce originally called "Quality", "Relation", and "Representation". These three categories and the "recursively-transcendental" relations between them may be illustrated roughly as follows:

- Any innerworldly being has some "Quality" due to which it is.
- Any innerworldly being stands in a "Relation" to a second (its "correlate"), due to which it has its "Quality".
- Any innerworldly being is a "Representation" with respect to a third (its

5 I have developed this thesis elsewhere in detail (e.g., Hünefeldt 2002, 2003).

6 Cf. Peirce's manuscript *On a Method of Searching for the Categories*, in: C. S. Peirce, *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: 1857-1866* (Vol. 1), Indiana University Press, 1982.

“interpretant”), due to which it stands in “Relation” to the second.

Peirce’s three categories thus describe a particular kind of characteristics of any mentally representable world, namely the characteristics of any innerworldly being. However, his approach also has implications for other kinds of characteristics. First, Peirce’s systematic critique of Kant’s transcendental philosophy also concerned Kant’s view of space and time, which are reinterpreted in non-psychologistic, phenomenological terms as dimensions within which innerworldly beings can appear. Second, by starting from a phenomenologically reduced equivalent of Kant’s “original unity of apperception”, Peirce’s approach presupposes an original “unity of being”, i.e., an original connectedness between all innerworldly beings, which in his later works is referred to by the notion of “synechism”. Third, if the three categories are abstracted from the innerworldly beings to which they are attributed, they denote the three different “modes of being” “Firstness”, “Secondness”, and “Thirdness”, which roughly correspond to the modes of being of possibility, actuality, and law-like regularity. Fourth, by recursively applying the categories to the relates and relations involved in “Representation”, Peirce developed a systematic taxonomy of different types of representations or “signs”. A particular important and well-known part of this taxonomy is the distinction “icon”, and “index”, and “symbol”, which concerns the relation between a sign and its object.

This latter distinction is particularly interesting in the context of this essay because it concerns different ways in which representations can represent their objects: “icons” by similarity, “indexes” by an actual relation, and “symbols” by habit or convention. The distinction is therefore relevant for our question as to which are the ways in which the characteristics of any mentally representable world, in general, and of any mentally representable *subjective* world, in particular, can be represented. In the previous section we have seen that in human beings there are basically two kinds of mental representation: picture-like and language-like. These two kinds of mental representation can now be accounted for in terms of Peirce’s taxonomy of representations, specifically in terms of the distinction between “iconic” and “symbolic” representations.

As suggested above, Peirce's approach aimed at systematically identifying the characteristics of any mentally representable world in general. On the ground of that approach, the characteristics of any mentally representable *subjective* world must accordingly be understood as perspectival and subjective specifications of the characteristics identified by Peirce. These specifications are as manifold as the individuals that are supposed to have a subjective world. In fact, they depend on both the specific functional organization of these individuals (e.g., their sensory and perceptual modalities and cognitive abilities) and their specific environments. In general, however, each of their subjective worlds can be supposed to be characterized by innerworldly beings that have specific qualities, stand in specific relations to other innerworldly beings, and are specific representations, i.e., have specific meanings. Based on Peirce's taxonomy of representations, it is furthermore possible to distinguish between different kinds of subjective worlds characterized by different types of representations. For example, there may be worlds that are characterized only by "iconic" and "indexical" representations but lack "symbolic" representations. This is likely to be the case for the subjective worlds of most non-human animals.

4. Conclusions

In the first two parts of this essay, I sketched a conceptual framework that might contribute to accounting for the manifold ways in which the notion of "limits of empathy" is referred to in the scientific literature. The framework I sketched illustrates how manifold and complex these ways are, even though its meshes are still very large and capture only very broad kinds of meanings. Its appropriateness and value need to be proven by classifying existing references to the notion of "limits of empathy" in terms of it.

In the third part of the essay, I focused on a specific kind of "limit" concerning a specific understanding or kind of "empathy", namely the "absolute limits of mental perspective-taking". This specific kind of "limits of empathy" is particularly important because the absolute limits of mental perspective-taking concern all conceivable instances of mental perspective-

taking and because mental perspective-taking plays a particularly important role in conceptualizations of empathy in general. As mental perspective-taking amounts to representing the subjective worlds of other individuals, the absolute limits of mental perspective-taking are limits concerning any mental representation of other subjective worlds. In order to illustrate what the general characteristics of any mentally representable subjective world might be like, I referred to the results of Peirce's systematic critique of Kants transcendental philosophy. In terms of these results, it is possible to account not only for basic characteristics usually associated with subjective worlds (e.g., qualia, facticity, meaningfulness), but also for the distinction between different ways of representing these characteristics (e.g., in terms of "iconic" or "picture-like" vs. "symbolic" or "language-like" representations).

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