

HSS658

Rethinking Interpersonal Understanding

Beyond Theory and Simulation: The Lived Experience of Personhood

Matthew Ratcliffe: The Structure of Interpersonal Experience

What is it to encounter someone as a person?

Current approaches to Interpersonal Understanding

- **Attribution Theory:** Focuses on an ability to attribute beliefs, desires and other kinds of mental states to people
- **Simulation:** An ability to ‘simulate’ the minds of other people and imagine ourselves in their situation
- What about our **felt sense** of others as persons?

The Problem with Traditional Accounts

- Why Attribution Theory and Simulation Fall Short

Traditional Approaches to Understanding Others

- Two dominant theories explain how we understand other minds

Attribution Theory

We **attribute mental states** using a folk psychological theory about **how beliefs and desires cause behavior**

Simulation Theory

We understand others by **mentally simulating their experiences** and **imagining ourselves in their situation**

The Problem

Both approaches miss something fundamental: **our direct lived experience of others as persons**

Personhood as Primitive

- For Strawson, “person” is a basic concept **not built from mental + physical parts**. We experience people **as unified beings with both physical presence and mental characteristics**. This is **not reducible to “having a mind”** but involves a holistic perception of personhood.
- Strawson distinguishes between **M-(material) and P(psychological)-predicates**. P-predicate are possessed only by persons while M-predicates are possessed by both material things and persons (a rock and a person both possess weight but only a person can have feelings of jealousy or can walk or smile or think or hope)

How do we Experience Persons: The Phenomenology of Encountering Persons

- **Immediate Recognition**

We instantly recognize others as persons without conscious inference (of M and P-predicates as a unified entity)

- **Moments of ambiguity in encountering persons**

Gestalt Switch

Waxworks and unsettling gazes reveal shifts between personal/impersonal experience

Uncanny

Feelings arise due to conflicting experiences of an entity as both animate and inanimate (personal and impersonal) e.g. talking dolls, being stared by a chimpanzee producing an odd feeling of personal/impersonal indeterminacy

An Objection

- There may be **no single, generic experience of “personhood,”** since we experience others **in many different ways** (indifference, love, fear, discomfort, etc.).
- Despite their diversity, these experiences *presuppose a more basic, underlying sense of personhood.*
- This underlying sense becomes clearer in *anomalous experiences* where it is missing.
- Example: **Renee’s account** in *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl*, where others no longer appear as persons but as lifeless, mechanical objects.
- Her experience is not of changed perceptual features, *but of the absence of a felt sense of the personal.*
- As a result, **others appear physically the same yet profoundly altered—inhuman, unreal, and disturbing**

Direct Perception

- **Personal experience does not require attributing propositional attitudes** (beliefs, desires, intentions).
- Many everyday interactions rely on *a perceptual appreciation of agency* within shared practices, rather than explicit “mindreading.”
- It would be implausible to deny that such interactions **already involve a sense of being with a person.**
- The idea that **personhood consists in merely *being able* to attribute beliefs and desires is problematic, since we also apply such attributions to non-humans, institutions, and artefacts.**
- **Expanding the mental states involved (e.g., emotions, sensations, pain) does not solve the problem: recognizing these states does not by itself explain a distinctive experience of personhood.**

Why Simulation is not enough?

- Personal experience cannot be reduced to perceiving specific expressions or behaviors, **since it can arise from many different and minimal perceptual cues** (e.g., a creaking door, a touch, breathing).
- Simulation theories suggest we experience others as persons by simulating their experiences, but this is circular: **simulation presupposes already recognizing something as a person.**
- According to Scheler, **personal experience involves both *similarity* and *irreducible distinctness*: others' experiences are grasped as *theirs*, not as copies of our own.**
- **Our responses to others are directed at *their* situations and are not always preceded by experiential replication or simulation.**

Bodily Response

Encountering persons involves immediate
bodily and experiential changes

Simulation and relational experience

- A possible reply to objections is to distinguish **high-level** from **low-level simulation**, and to claim that personal experience relies on low-level simulation that is not consciously accessible.
- Before explaining personal experience in terms of simulation, we must first clarify **what the experience itself consists of**.
- Ratcliffe proposes that personal experience is fundamentally a **felt sense of connectedness to others**, not the successful replication (copy) of their psychological states.
- Even if low-level matching or simulation plays a role, it does not explain the **relational structure** that makes personal experience distinctive.
- Appeals to **simulation, replication, or matching fail to address this relational, experiential core**.
- Thus, simulation is not exactly false but **misdirected**, it misses what is essential about personal experience.
- For the same reason, **personal experience cannot be explained by appealing to an implicit or explicit theory of persons**.
- Our understanding of personhood originates in **a distinctive kind of feeling, rather than in theoretical know**

Beyond Mindreading

- Many interactions rely on direct, perceptual sense of agency rather than cognitive mindreading.
- Personhood is not established only after mental-state attribution.
- Simulation presupposes already recognizing someone as a person and fails to capture the sense of others as distinct from oneself.

Bodily Feelings, Possibilities and Other People

The Bodily Dimension of Personal Experience

Felt Connection

Personal experience involves a felt sense of connection rather than cognitive inference

Sartre's Insight

Encountering a person changes bodily experience and world experience together - feeling "seen" is immediate

World Transformation

Others reshape our sense of possibilities - what feels possible changes in their presence

Mutual Transformation

Shared experiences can breathe new life into the world, creating genuine interpersonal connection that goes beyond simulation. This involves mutual openness and vulnerability, balanced by social norms. We inevitably affect one another's worlds through our presence and actions.

Goldman's example

When we have read a book or poem so often that we can no longer find any amusement in reading it by ourselves, we can still take pleasure in reading it to a companion. To him it has all the graces of novelty; we enter into the surprise and admiration which it naturally excites in him, but which it is no longer capable of exciting in us; we consider all the ideas which it presents, rather in the light of which they appear to him, than in that in which they appear to ourselves, and we are amused by sympathy with his amusement which thus enlivens our own. On the contrary, we should be vexed if he did not seem to be entertained with it, and we could no longer take any pleasure in reading it to him. (Smith 1759/2000, p. 11)

- The passage highlights **interaction between two people**, not just one person simulating another.
- While one person appreciates the other's experience, this appreciation is **self-transformative**, altering and enriching one's own experience.
- The example does not involve two separate experiences (one's own and a simulated one) coexisting side by side.
- Instead, the shared engagement **reshapes the original experience**—the once-dull book becomes enlivened through interaction.
- **The experience is fundamentally collective: “we” perceive the book together, mutually shaping each other's perspectives.**
- Pure simulation fails to capture this **relational, mutual, and self-affecting** character of interpersonal experience.

Simulationist Account of Goldman's example

- A simulationist could reinterpret the example as a sequence (simulation → feelings → altered experience), which avoids outright contradiction.
- However, interpersonal experience **does not always conform to neat distinctions between one's own experience, appreciation of another's experience, and associated feelings.**
- In some cases—especially in experiencing someone as a person **these elements form one unified experience,** not separate processes.
- Personal experience is described as **a bodily feeling that simultaneously:**
 - **acknowledges the other as a distinct center of experience and agency, and**
 - **transforms how one experiences the world.**

Sartre on experiencing the other

- For Sartre, our most fundamental sense of another *person* is **not** based on mental-state attribution, analogizing, inferring, hypothesizing, deploying a theory, or simulating.
- Instead, it consists in a **felt, bodily change**—a transformation **in how one experiences oneself and the world**.
- Sartre's example of **shame** illustrates this: **shame arises immediately upon sensing another's presence, not after reflective judgment or evaluation**.
- Shame is a **reflex-like, pre-reflective reaction**, described as an “immediate shudder,” not the outcome of conscious reasoning.
- The feeling of shame **already includes awareness of another person**; one cannot feel ashamed without feeling ashamed *before someone*.

Sartre's description of Shame

“I have just made an awkward or vulgar gesture. This gesture clings to me; I neither judge it nor blame it. I simply live it. I realize it in the mode of for-itself. But now suddenly I raise my head. Somebody was there and has seen me. Suddenly I realize the vulgarity of my gesture, and I am ashamed.”

The Look

- What shame reveals is the relation of “**being-seen-by-another**”, which Sartre calls “*the look*.”
- “The look” has two inseparable aspects:
 - recognizing another as a **locus of experience**, and
 - recognizing oneself as an **object of that experience**.
- This is not literal seeing; it is a **sense of being perceived**, which can be triggered by many cues (sounds, movements, silence), not just eyes.

‘The look’ is not to be interpreted literally, as seeing a pair of eyes. It is not a matter of perceiving that one has actually been seen **but of having a sense of being perceived**. Hence it is **something more abstract, which can be associated with any number of different perceived properties**:

Of course, what *most often* manifests a look is the convergence of two ocular globes in my direction. But the look will be given just as well on occasion when there is a rustling in the branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain. (Sartre 1989, p. 257)

Bodily feelings and the possibilities of the world

- Sartre explains this by linking bodily feeling to **experienced possibilities in the world**.
- Normally, the body functions as an **inconspicuous medium** for action and perception, not as an object of attention.
- **Our experience of the world includes not just actual properties, but practical possibilities, shaped by bodily capacities and dispositions.**
- **When bodily experience changes, world-experience changes with it.**
- In **the keyhole example**, the voyeur's sudden awareness of another transforms her body into an object and disrupts her absorbed activity.
- **As the body becomes awkward and object-like, the possibilities offered by the world collapse, and the situation is experienced differently.**
- Thus, **experiencing a person is fundamentally a bodily-affective shift that simultaneously restructures one's relation to oneself, others, and the world.**

Felt Transformation of the world in another's perception

- For Sartre, **feeling object-like** is feeling oneself as an **object of another's perception**, inhabiting a world now organized around *their* projects and purposes.
- This shift is not cognitive or inferential; it is a **felt transformation of one's being-in-the-world**.
- One does not merely *know* one is being looked at; one is **immediately affected**, and this is something one *lives*.
- Awareness of the other, the feeling (e.g. shame), and the altered experience of the world are **not sequential steps** but **one unified experience**.
- Two key claims are at issue:
 - (a) **changes in bodily phenomenology can also be changes in perceived worldly possibilities;**
 - (b) **such changes constitute our basic sense of others as persons.**

Phenomenologists on the same page as Sartre

- Sartre's view is often criticized for **over-emphasising confrontational encounters**.
- The broader phenomenological framework underlying Sartre's view is widely shared and plausible.
- Phenomenologists argue that **bodily experience and world experience are inseparable**.
- Husserl maintains that the body is not only an object of perception but an **organ of perception**, shaping the possibilities things offer.
- Possibilities can appear more or less **“enticing,”** reflecting an **affective force** experienced through the body.
- Merleau-Ponty similarly holds that having a body means inhabiting a **structured field of perceptual possibilities** integral to the world.
- Empirical evidence supports the idea that **bodily changes alter world-experience**, lending plausibility to this phenomenological claim.
- The idea that experiencing others as persons involves a **shift in perceived possibilities** is not unique to Sartre.
- Merleau-Ponty notes that perceiving a living, acting body immediately **reshapes the significance of surrounding objects**, which now appear as offering possibilities for that person as well.
- Empirical research suggests that perceived significance is influenced by **others' actions, expressions, and gaze**, and that this effect is **perceptual, automatic, and developmentally early**.

Interpersonal Connection

J.H. van den Berg's example

J. H. van den Berg's example of showing a guest around the town where you live:

....one can learn to know another best by travelling with him through a country or by looking at a town with him. One who often shows the same town to different people will be struck by the ever new way in which the town appears in the conversation that is held about the sights during such a walk. These different ways are identical with the people with whom one walks, they are forms of subjectivity. The subject shows itself in the things.... (1952, p. 166)

Second Example

“We all know people in whose company we would prefer not to go shopping, not to visit a museum, not to look at a landscape, because we would like to keep these things undamaged. Just as we all know people in whose company it is pleasant to take a walk because the objects encountered come to no harm. These people we call friends, good companions, loved ones.”

Mine, Yours, and Ours

- Sartre highlights that **recognising someone as a person is always self-affecting**: it alters one's sense of one's own possibilities.
- This self-affection can take **multiple forms**, not just the confrontational ones Sartre emphasises.
- In **Sartre's park example, another person's presence draws possibilities away from oneself, making the world feel like *his* rather than *mine*.**
- By contrast, van den Berg's example of **walking with a guest shows how another's presence can enrich one's environment**, opening up new meanings and possibilities.
- Here, subjectivity is expressed *through* things: the world appears differently **with different people**.
- **Our world is not a fixed system of possibilities but one that is continually reshaped by relations with others.**
- **Interpersonal experience involves a dynamic interplay of possibilities experienced as mine, yours, and ours, all interrelated.**

Shared experience

- Even in shared experience, the other is still felt as **distinct**, with some possibilities belonging to her rather than oneself.
- Being with others can either **enrich or impoverish** one's world, sometimes without anything specific being said or done.
- Such effects are shaped by **pervasive, non-localised feelings** (e.g. comfort, threat, openness, safety, tension).
- Simply *being with* another person can transform one's world and simultaneously be an experience of **connecting with them as a person**.
- Because of this mutual influence, **interaction better exemplifies personal experience than detached observation**.
- **Feelings of connectedness shape both how we perceive others and how we interact with them, and they evolve as interaction unfolds**.
- Critics of theory and simulation accounts argue that interpersonal understanding is **dependent on interaction**, not detached contemplation.
- However, personal experience need not involve explicit focus on the other or deliberate interpretation; it often concerns how the **shared world is transformed**.

Recognition

- Importantly, a sense of others as persons typically **precedes interaction** and is not constituted by it.
- Reflecting on interaction nevertheless helps illuminate the **structure of personal experience**, since some interactions express it more fully than others.
- Degrees of personal engagement vary (e.g. a routine transaction vs. an intimate declaration of love).
- Recognising someone as a person requires **recognising the possibility of richer relations**, even if one does not actually participate in them.
- **Analogy:** just as recognising something as a cup involves grasping the possibility of drinking from it, **recognising someone as a person involves grasping the possibility of meaningful interpersonal relations.**

Personal Experience of Who rather than What?

- Simply prioritising **second-person relations** over third-person ones is insufficient to explain recognition of personhood.
- Some second-person interactions can be **impersonal** (e.g. refusing a salesperson), while some third-person observations can involve **deep personal engagement** (e.g. watching one's child perform).
- Impersonal second-person encounters often involve responding to a **social type** (“salesperson”) rather than engaging with a unique individual or “**who.**”
- Experiencing someone as a person differs from recognising objects or animals, where individuality usually does not matter.
- Personal experience involves **receptiveness to someone as a ‘who’ rather than a ‘what’**, not merely recognising category membership.
- Although a certain kind of second-person relation is important, personal experience is **not strongest** in interactions marked by defensiveness, disconnection, or rigid role constraints.
- Knud Løgstrup offers a more precise account: relating to someone as a person involves **openness to the fact that we shape each other's worlds.**

Felt Receptiveness to interpersonal experience

- Through our attitudes, we affect the **scope, tone, and quality** of another's world (e.g. making it feel secure, threatening, rich, or dull).
- This influence is **inevitable and non-theoretical**, occurring through presence, gestures, and expressions rather than beliefs or doctrines.
- Because we unavoidably affect others, personal relations involve **inescapable responsibility** for how the other's life unfolds, even in small ways.
- Shaping another's world means altering the **possibilities it offers**, both locally (what feels inviting) and globally (the overall tone of experience).
- Løgstrup differs from Sartre by emphasising **habitual trust** as central to personal relations.
- Engaging with someone as a person involves a **felt, bodily openness** to being affected and transformed by them.

- Rich interpersonal relations require **mutual openness, mutual responsibility, and some vulnerability**.
- Vulnerability is not opposed to structure: **social norms** both constrain and enable personal relations, preventing over-exposure while allowing secure interaction.
- The richest personal experience involves a **balance between vulnerability and openness to self-transformation**.
- The author proposes that sensing another as a person consists in **felt receptiveness to the possibility of such relations**, along with awareness of more impoverished alternatives.
- Further support for this view can be gained by examining **psychiatric disturbances of interpersonal experience**, where aspects of the personal are diminished or lost.

Pathologies of Interpersonal Experience

Chronic Depression

- Severe depression often involves a **loss of felt interpersonal connection**, not just the absence of others but a painful awareness of that absence.
- There is a **paradoxical tension**: sufferers yearn for connection but feel incapable of experiencing it comfortably (Karp 1996).
- Interpersonal connection seems **irretrievably gone**, contributing to feelings of **isolation, entrapment, or being cut off** from the world.
- Sylvia Plath describes this as **being enclosed under a glass bell jar**, a metaphor common in autobiographical accounts.
- Another description likens it to **being trapped inside a balloon**, unable to reach out or connect physically or emotionally.
- The exact metaphor varies (prison, tunnel, wall), but the experience is consistently one of **estrangement from others**.
- Loss of connection is **inextricable from a broader change in world experience**: the world feels smaller, closed, and devoid of openness or dynamism.
- Normally, interpersonal connections allow us to **shape and reshape our world**; without them, the world loses its potential and vitality.
- This loss is often accompanied by **anomalous bodily feelings**, diminished vitality, and restricted movement (Fuchs 2005; Ratcliffe 2009b).

Inversion of Sartre's view

- The phenomenology suggests an **inversion of Sartre's view**: while he emphasized how others can constrain possibilities, **depression shows that others also expand and sustain our experiential possibilities**.
- A loss of interpersonal connectedness can also lead to a **diminished sense of others as persons**.
- Eugene Minkowski describes “schizophrenic melancholia” as an example: **without felt contact, people become indistinct, schematised, or persecutory**, losing their individuality and personal significance.
- In this state, others are experienced not as complex individuals but as **generalized forces or manikins**, showing how personal experience is tied to **felt relational possibilities**.
- Our sense of others as persons and the possibilities of the world are intertwined, and their disruption profoundly alters both world and self-experience.

Psychiatric Revelations: When Connection Fails

Neural Pathways

Examination of disrupted neural communication patterns in psychiatric disorders and their behavioral manifestations.

Social Disconnection

Analysis of how failed interpersonal connections contribute to and exacerbate mental health conditions.

Emotional Fallout

Clinical observations of the psychological consequences when human bonding mechanisms malfunction.

Depression and loss of interpersonal connection

- Patients describe **others as distant, phantom-like, or intangible**, reflecting a profound sense of **isolation and estrangement**.
- Conversation feels **unreachable or ineffective**, with words failing to correspond to thoughts.
- This illustrates that **loss of felt connection is closely tied to a diminished sense of others as persons**, even without specific emotions like guilt.

Paranoid Schizophrenia and threat from others

- R. D. Laing observes that in psychotic conditions, the presence of others can feel like **intrusion or penetration into the self**.
- Here, **mutual influence is replaced by one-way influence**, skewing the openness-vulnerability balance toward vulnerability.
- Others are experienced **primarily as sources of threat**, reducing their individuality to roles that convey danger.
- Yet Laing notes that being perceived by others is **fundamental to human existence**, as we require recognition and affirmation. Cutting oneself off removes **life-affirming connectedness**.

Interpersonal Oddness and ‘praecox feeling’

Some interactions feel **essentially lacking in personhood**, as when interacting with individuals with schizophrenia or autism.

The experience is one of **uncanniness, alienness, or missing relational potential**.

Minkowski describes a patient whose psyche felt **too fully known**, leaving **no open future or transformative possibilities**.

- Such a patient is experienced more like a **complete object than a locus of potential**, highlighting that **personhood involves openness and potentiality**, not exhaustive knowledge.

Implications for Understanding Personhood

- Unlike theory-theory or simulation approaches, **knowing everything about a person would diminish their status as a person**, because unpredictability and the ability to transform one's world are central to personal experience.
- Persons are **experienced as loci of possibility**, capable of reshaping our world in ways that objects or fully predictable entities cannot.
- The **unpredictable and open-ended nature of persons** is constitutive of their personhood.

Connection to phenomenology and Løgstrup

- These psychiatric cases support Sartre's view that **sense of the personal is both bodily/felt and world-affecting**.
- A **fully rich experience of the personal** involves a **potentially self-transformative relation**, balancing openness to influence and vulnerability.
- Anything that **blocks this potential**—whether due to illness, alienation, or predictability—**diminishes the sense of personhood**.

[Other Person as Locus of Possibility]



Felt Bodily Experience

- openness
- vulnerability
- responsiveness



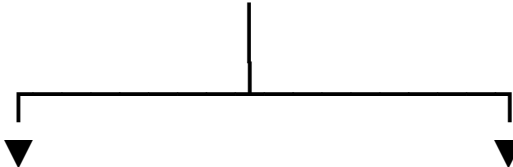
Change in World Experience

- perceived possibilities altered/enriched
- environment reshaped



Sense of the Other as a Person ("Who")

- unpredictable
- capable of mutual transformation
- not fully knowable



[Fully Rich Interaction]

- Mutual influence
- World enriched
- Openness + vulnerability

[Disruption / Psychiatric Alteration]

- Loss of interpersonal connection
- Others feel alien or threatening
- Persons feel like objects
- World feels closed, possibilities lost

Core Idea

- **Personhood is not just about cognitive understanding, but about the felt potential to enter into a transformative, relational space, where one's own possibilities and experience of the world are affected. Loss of this potential, as in depression or certain psychoses, leads to a profound alteration in both world experience and sense of others as persons.**