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Empathy as *Imago Dei*:
Moral Perception, Alterity, and the Rehabilitation of a Disparaged Virtue in Evangelical Ethics

Abstract

A movement within Christian ethics now claims that empathy is not a virtue but a vice, a solvent of conviction that invites manipulation and weakens the courage to speak truth; but, the shortest sentence in the Gospels places tears on the face of the incarnate One. This paper argues that recovering empathy as the cruciform posture modeled by Christ is not a concession to sentimentality but a return to the very heart and purpose of the *imago Dei*.

In 1916 a young phenomenologist defended a dissertation arguing that empathy is the act by which one consciousness grasps another at all; twenty-six years later the same thinker was murdered at Auschwitz. Nearly a century later, the capacity to perceive the "other" as "other" is recast as a threat. This paper contends that the indictment rests on a category mistake. By conflating disciplined moral perception with sentimental fusion or affective contagion, the anti-empathy position condemns the former for vices that belong only to the latter.

Through Edith Stein's phenomenology of non-appropriative access, Emmanuel Levinas's demonstration that the neighbor's claim arrives before deliberation, Augustine's relocation of virtue from the quantity to the order of love, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's identification of *Stellvertretung* as the Christological form of bearing the other without absorption, empathy emerges as moral perception that preserves alterity while handing judgment its proper object. When this capacity is grounded in a relational and vocational reading of the divine image, it appears as the human enactment of the office for which humanity was created: to represent the God who is communion by perceiving and moving toward the neighbor as irreducible "other."

In a polarized age, the rehabilitation of this disparaged virtue, therefore, equips communities to hold the immediate sufferer and the unseen sufferer within a single field of justice and to recognize that withholding perception defaces our divinely appointed vocation rather than safeguarding clarity. To strive to be conformed to the Perfected Image is to recover empathy as the cruciform posture the Divine Image itself demands.

Key words: empathy, *imago Dei*, moral perception, alterity, theological anthropology, kenosis, Christian ethics, phenomenology

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Introduction: The Disparaged Virtue

In August of 1916 a young phenomenologist defended at Freiburg a dissertation arguing that empathy is the act by which one consciousness grasps another consciousness at all.[1] Edith Stein had followed Husserl from Göttingen, served as his assistant, and made the problem of *Einfühlung* the proving ground of his account of intersubjectivity.[2] The work that resulted treated empathy, not as a sentiment to be indulged or feared but as a structure of cognition, the basic form in which other-minded beings are given. Twenty-six years later the same author was murdered at Auschwitz.[3] That a thinker who staked her early philosophy on the apprehension of the irreducible "other" should die in the paradigmatic refusal of the "other" lends the concept a moral seriousness no single argument can supply on its own.

Set against that history is a contemporary spectacle. A movement that affirms, often loudly, that human beings bear the image of God (*imago Dei*) has begun to indict the very capacity by which persons recognize persons as persons. Joe Rigney's *The Sin of Empathy* makes the case with a provocateur's economy: empathy is not a virtue but a sin, a solvent of conviction and a lever of

[1] On the biographical contour, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Edith Stein: A Philosophical Prologue, 1913–1922* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). Stein passed her doctoral examination under Husserl at Freiburg *summa cum laude* in the summer of 1916 (the oral examination on 3 August 1916); the phenomenological portion of the thesis was published as *Zum Problem der Einfühlung* (Halle, 1917).

[2] MacIntyre, *Edith Stein*; on Stein's appointment as Husserl's first paid assistant (October 1916–February 1918), see Dermot Moran, "Edith Stein," in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, first published March 18, 2020, substantive revision May 8, 2024, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/stein/.

[3] Stein entered the Discalced Carmelite convent at Cologne in 1933, taking the name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. Arrested by the SS at the Carmel in Echt, the Netherlands, on 2 August 1942, she was deported and killed in the gas chamber at Auschwitz-Birkenau on 9 August 1942. See Waltraut Herbstrith, *Edith Stein: A Biography*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992).

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manipulation, and the faithful leader is the one who resists emotional identification.[4] The thesis has not remained within seminary debate; it has been popularized in political form, where empathy is recoded as a partisan liability rather than a theological one, and from there it has migrated into civic argument about who deserves compassion at all.[5] The paradox is exact. An anthropology of the image disowns the act through which the image is perceived in another.

This paper argues that the anti-empathy position is not a defence of moral clarity but a failure of philosophical anthropology. Its case depends on a conflation; empathy is identified with sentimental fusion, with the collapse of the distance between self and other and is condemned for the vices that belong to that collapse. However, the conflation can be exposed and the concept recovered. Read through Edith Stein's phenomenology, Emmanuel Levinas's account of the face, Augustine's ordering of love, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology of vicarious representative action, empathy appears as a graced capacity to perceive the "other" as irreducibly "other". So understood, empathy guards the very boundary between persons it is charged with dissolving, and far from supplanting judgment, it hands judgment its object, the moral claim the neighbour lays down before deliberation begins. It is, in short, the affective and perceptual posture that the *imago Dei* already requires, and it takes its definitive shape in the kenotic movement of Christ toward the neighbour (Phil 2:5–8).

[4]Joe Rigney, *The Sin of Empathy: Compassion and Its Counterfeits* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2025).

[5]Allie Beth Stuckey, *Toxic Empathy: How Progressives Exploit Christian Compassion* (New York: Sentinel, 2024). The mainstreaming of the argument is documented here, not predicted; no inevitable terminus is claimed.

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The method is phenomenological and theological-anthropological, ordered throughout by a Christological centre. The argument proceeds in seven movements after this introduction. The second reconstructs the anti-empathy case in its strongest form and exposes the two assumptions buried beneath it. The third turns to Stein, and through Stein to Husserl, for an account of empathy as non-appropriative access. The fourth enlists Levinas to show that the moral claim of the neighbour precedes deliberation rather than threatening it. The fifth recovers Augustine's *ordo amoris* to dissolve the false dilemma of restraint against indulgence. The sixth reads Bonhoeffer's *Stellvertretung* and the kenosis of Philippians 2 as the Christological form of the virtue. The seventh gathers these into a relational ontology of the image, and the conclusion draws the consequences for formation. The whole extends a trajectory begun biblically, where the *imago Dei* was presented as an ontological limit against the instrumental reduction of the person; here that limit receives its positive turn.[6]

The Anti-Empathy Argument and Its Buried Anthropology

True scholarly charity requires that the position be stated at its strongest before it is opposed. Three versions deserve attention, because together they reveal a common foundation.

The first is exegetical and lexical. Rigney builds a moral distinction on the contrast between sympathy and empathy, glossing the former as suffering *with* another and the latter as suffering *in* another, an inward absorption that displaces the self into the sufferer's standpoint and so forfeits the vantage from which truth can be told. On this account, empathy is structurally captive; because

[6]Dawn Lewis Sutherland, "Tech Beyond Its Maker: AI, Idolatry, and the Inversion of Human Agency" (paper presented at the Koinonia Forum, Princeton Theological Seminary, March 7, 2026); cf. Sutherland, *From Babel to AI: Idolatry, Transhumanism, and the Crisis of Imago Dei* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2025).

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it relocates the agent inside the "other's" felt perspective, it must lose the leverage required to contradict that perspective, and a community "in the grip of empathy" is therefore marked, in Rigney's words, by "cowardice, indifference, and cruelty."[7] The claim concerns empathy alone: compassion is welcome, while empathy, so defined, is compassion's counterfeit.

The second version is secular and analytic. Paul Bloom's *Against Empathy* concedes nothing to sentiment and argues on cognitive-scientific grounds that empathy, understood as feeling what one takes another to feel, is a poor guide to action. It is a spotlight: intense, narrow, and innumerate. "Empathy is a spotlight focusing on certain people in the here and now. This makes us care about them, but it leaves us insensitive to the long-term consequences of our acts and blind as well to the suffering of those we do not or cannot empathize with."[8] Bloom's remedy is "rational compassion," a cooler concern that weighs outcomes and so escapes the parochialism of felt identification. The anti-empathy theologians borrow the diagnosis while declining the therapy.[9]

A third register, more polemical and harder to source, genders the charge: empathy becomes a feminized susceptibility that erodes conviction, and suspicion of an affect slides into suspicion of those presumed to feel it. That move trades the terrain of cognition for the terrain of

[7]Rigney, The Sin of Empathy, 45.

[8]Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York: Ecco, 2016), 31; for the definition of empathy as feeling what one takes another to feel, see 16.

[9]Rigney enlists Bloom's critique of empathy's selectivity while substituting a theology of detachment for Bloom's consequentialist correction. The borrowing is uneven, since Bloom's "rational compassion" remains a form of other-directed care that the anti-empathy theology tends to treat with suspicion.

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social order, and it need not be adjudicated here. What follows engages the strongest forms of the case, the exegetical and the analytic, and what unseats those unseats their cruder echo.

Beneath these three versions lie two assumptions, neither of which is defended because neither is noticed. The first is mechanistic, and it treats empathy as affective contagion, a transfer of feeling from one psyche to another that overwrites the recipient's judgment in the act of arriving. On this picture to feel-with is to be moved-by, and to be moved is to lose the helm; the emotion is a current that carries the agent where it will. The second assumption is voluntarist. It locates moral agency in the sovereign act of the will, so that the affections appear as threats to the clarity from which the will is supposed to choose. Feeling, on this view, is what the will must master or exclude, never the medium through which the morally relevant is first disclosed. The two assumptions are joined by a single inheritance: a faculty psychology that severs perception and affect from reason and will. The genealogy usually offered for this severance is Stoic, and the label fits only with a qualification that turns to the argument's advantage. Margaret Graver's reconstruction shows that *apatheia* was never coldness. The Stoic sage was free from feeling that reason had not endorsed, and the school made express room for the *eupatheiai*, the rational good-affections of joy, caution, and goodwill.[10] Even Stoicism, then, proposed to order affect rather than excise it. The tradition running from Augustine to Aquinas pushed further in the same direction, treating the passions as capacities for right direction rather than threats to be suppressed. Set against either ancestor, the

[10]Margaret R. Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). On the *eupatheiai*, the rational good-affections the Stoics did admit, see her treatment of the good emotions; the Stoic *sapiens* is "without passion" in the sense that no movement unendorsed by reason can carry him, not in the sense of insensibility. The Christian appropriation of the Stoic critique has a long and ambivalent history, and its Augustinian and Thomistic strand orders the passions rather than excising them.

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anti-empathy theology is the harsher doctrine, since it casts suspicion on the perception itself, the seeing of the "other," that an ordered account of the affections would refine and put to use.

The diagnosis identifies the hinge of the whole dispute. If empathy simply is fusion, the critics are partly right. An act that dissolved the agent into the sufferer would indeed disable judgment, invite manipulation, and forfeit the standpoint from which truth is told. Everything, therefore, depends on a single question: is there a non-fusional account of empathy, an account on which feeling-with another preserves rather than effaces the difference between them? The phenomenological tradition answers "yes," and it answers with precision.

Stein and Non-Appropriative Access

The decisive resource is the phenomenology of empathy that Stein developed within, and against, Husserl's analysis of intersubjectivity. The setting is the *Fifth Cartesian Meditation*, where Husserl confronts the threat that the reduction to the transcendental ego collapses into solipsism. His answer comes from the concept of appresentation. The "other" is given to me but never given as I am given to myself. Through a passive associative pairing (*Paarung*) and an analogical apperception, the sense "another animate subject" is transferred to the body before me, and that subject's inner life is co-presented, appresented, without ever being rendered originally present. The structural point is exact and, for the argument pursued here, very decisive: "Properly speaking, neither the other Ego himself, nor his subjective processes or his appearances themselves, nor anything else belonging to his own essence, becomes given in our experience originally."[11] The

[11]Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), §52; for the constituting apparatus of appresentation, analogical apperception, and pairing, see §§50–54.

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inaccessibility is not a defect to be overcome; rather, it is the condition of there being another at all. Were the "other's" experience given to me as my own is, it would be a moment of my own essence, and the "other" would not be "other."

To take Husserl's apparatus as it stands, however, would be to accept it from a witness his own heirs distrust. The charge that the *Fifth Meditation* does not so much secure the "other" as constitute it, reducing alterity to a modification of the ego, was pursued by Levinas and, at length, by Theunissen.[12] Derrida, by contrast, defended the analogical appresentation of the alter ego against Levinas, holding that the "other" given as an ego never originarily mine is exactly what preserves alterity.[13] If the "other" is built up by the synthesizing activity of my consciousness, the inaccessibility Husserl describes may be an artifact of my construction rather than a real exteriority. Stein had felt the difficulty from within Husserl's own circle, and her break with his transcendental idealism is the hinge on which her account of empathy changes. She keeps the structural insight, that the "other" is given non-originarily, appresented rather than lived, while refusing the idealism that would make the "other" the ego's product. On her reading the foreign

[12]The irony here deserves documentation. The first French translation of Husserl's *Méditations cartésiennes* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1931) was the work of Gabrielle Peiffer and Emmanuel Levinas, Levinas rendering the fourth and fifth meditations. The thinker who would later build an ethics on the charge that Husserl had failed to preserve the other was the conduit through which Husserl's constitution of the other reached France.

Michael Theunissen, *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber*, trans. Christopher Macann (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), pt. 1, the sustained critique of Husserl's transcendental theory of intersubjectivity in the Fifth Cartesian Meditation; for Levinas's parallel objection, see Emmanuel Levinas, *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998).

[13] Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79–153, where Derrida argues that the other given as an ego never originarily mine is exactly what preserves alterity, defending Husserl's appresentative account against Levinas.

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experience is encountered, not constituted, given as already there and as not mine. The mechanism is Husserl's; the metaphysics that lets it carry the weight of a genuine "other" is Stein's correction of Husserl, and for that reason the appeal to phenomenology here is finally an appeal to Stein.

Stein takes up this insight and frees it from the constructivist scaffolding that, in Husserl, threatens to make the "other" a product of the ego's synthesizing activity. Empathy, for Stein, is a *sui generis* act of cognition, irreducible to perception, memory, imagination, or inference, directed at the lived experience of another and presenting that experience precisely *as* another's. Most generally she defines it as "the experience of foreign consciousness in general, irrespective of the kind of the experiencing subject or of the subject whose consciousness is experienced."[14] The act is originary in its performance and non-originary in its content. In other words, I genuinely have the experience of the "other's" grief, yet what I have is given as not-my-own, as led by a source that I do not myself live through. Her own formulation captures the peculiar doubleness with a clarity later accounts have rarely matched: "In my non-primordial experience I feel, as it were, led by a primordial one not experienced by me but still there, manifesting itself in my non-primordial experience."[15]

The internal structure of the act confirms that alterity is preserved rather than dissolved. Stein analyses the empathic encounter as a movement of three moments, which the empathizer need not always complete and may repeat: 1) the emergence of the "other's" experience (*Auftauchen des Erlebnisses*) in and through bodily comportment, where the experience is directly

[14]Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein, 3rd rev. ed., Collected Works of Edith Stein 3 (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989), 11.

[15]Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 11.

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given but still unspecified; 2) its fulfilling explication (*erfüllende Explikation*), in which the empathizer follows the experience through; and 3) the synthesizing objectification (*zusammenfassende Vergegenständlichung*) of the explicated experience, in which it stands before the empathizer as the experience of another subject.[16] The second moment is the one most easily mistaken for fusion, and Stein guards against the mistake explicitly. To explicate the "other's" experience by reliving it through is to be, in her phrase, "at the foreign I," but being-at is not being-one-with.[17] In her criticism of Theodor Lipps, whose account of empathy as inner imitation threatened to collapse the empathizer into the empathized, she insists that the self remains "alongside" the "other" and is "never 'one with the other; empathy is sharply distinguished from affective unification (*Einsfühlung*), from emotional contagion, and from fellow-feeling.[18]

The vices the anti-empathy theology ascribes to empathy belong, on Stein's analysis, to its counterfeits. Emotional contagion overwrites judgment, while empathy preserves the distinction between the experience apprehended and the apprehending self. Affective unification dissolves the boundary between persons, whereas empathy, holding the foreign experience as foreign, leaves that boundary intact. The German vocabulary makes the equivocation visible in a way English obscures. The critics have indicted *Einsfühlung*, feeling-one-with, the fusional collapse, and have

[16]Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 10. On the contemporary recovery of Stein's analysis, see Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chaps. 6–8.

[17]Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 34.

[18]Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 16; see also 13–14. The vocabulary of the distinction is sharpened in Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, trans. Peter Heath (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), which separates genuine fellow-feeling (*Mitgefühl*) both from emotional infection (*Gefühlsansteckung*) and from identification (*Einsfühlung*).

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convicted *Einfühlung*, the disciplined perception of the "other" as "other." The whole anti-empathy case trades on the slide between the two. Once the slide is named, the case loses its object.

This is no verbal escape. The danger Rigney names is real, and a phenomenology that did no more than rename it would deserve the suspicion of having won by relabelling. Feelings can be weaponized. Manipulators trade on the tenderness of the compassionate; victims are pressed into silence by appeals to a fellow-feeling that has slipped its moorings; pastors meet the demand that to feel-with is to capitulate. Stein's analysis denies none of this. It locates the danger. The collapse that overwrites judgment and dissolves the self into the sufferer is a real event with a name, *Einsfühlung*, the fusion that counterfeits empathy and does not perfect it. What the phenomenology supplies is the criterion the anti-empathy theology lacks, a structural mark by which the counterfeit is told from the coin. Where the self is dissolved, the act has failed; where the self remains alongside the "other" and the "other" remains "other," the act is empathy, and the vices charged against it find no purchase. The recovery is, therefore, substantive rather than verbal. Far from blessing every feeling that calls itself compassion, the phenomenology shows which feeling earns the name, and why the one Rigney fears forfeits it.

It will be objected that Stein's "direct perception" of the "other's" mind overreaches, that we infer grief from a face rather than perceive it there. The objection misreads the modesty of her claim. Stein does not assert transparent access to the "other's" interior; she asserts that the "other's" lived body (*Leib*) is given as expressive, that distress is "co-given" in the distressed countenance

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as a natural unity, and that this givenness is non-originary throughout.[19] The empathizer apprehends that the "other" suffers without living the suffering as her own and without claiming to exhaust it; such restraint is the propriety of the act. An empathy that claimed to possess the "other's" experience would be the very appropriation the critics fear; Stein's empathy refuses the appropriation as a matter of structure. The phenomenology thus delivers what the theological dispute most needs: a rigorous account of feeling-with that is, by its own internal logic, non-appropriative. The neighbour's grief is presented to me, not produced in me. It leads me without becoming mine.

Levinas and the Face: The Summons Before Deliberation

If Stein dismantles the mechanistic assumption, Levinas dismantles the voluntarist one. The anti-empathy theology fears that a feeling which precedes deliberation must unseat the will. Levinas shows that the ethical relation is precisely what precedes deliberation, and that it is the condition of right willing rather than its casualty.

The face, in Levinas, is not a datum among data. It is the mode in which the "other" presents itself while exceeding every concept I form of it. "The way in which the 'other' presents himself, exceeding the idea of the 'other' in me, we here name face."[20] The face is not seen as an object is seen; it addresses. "The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse."[21] And the

[19]Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 75–84; cf. Zahavi, *Self and Other*, chap. 7, on the "direct perception" reading and its limits.

[20]Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 50.

[21]Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 66.

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first word of that address is an interdiction, a summons to responsibility that arrives before I have chosen to assume it. Responsibility, for Levinas, is anterior to freedom; the self is constituted as responsible for the "other" prior to any deliberation in which it might weigh whether to be. The ethical is "first philosophy," not a regional inquiry conducted after ontology has secured the ground.[22]

The consequence for the argument is immediate. The moral claim of the neighbour is not constituted by my decision, nor does it wait upon my prior reasoning to acquire its authority. It arrives in the perception of the face and lays its demand before deliberation begins. Empathy, on this reading, is the mode in which the face is registered as a claim; it is moral perception, the apprehension of the "other" as one to whom I am answerable. The voluntarist worry is therefore inverted. Feeling-before-judgment, far from unseating the will, discloses the reality to which a right will must respond. A will that excluded such perception would choose in the dark, blind to whom its choices touch.

Levinas must be read with discrimination, and his divergence from the canonical witness should be identified rather than smoothed over. His refusal of "totality," his resistance to any synthesis that would comprehend the "other" within a system, can be pushed into a suspicion of doctrine itself, and the asymmetry of his ethics, the relentless priority of the "other's" claim over any reciprocity, sits uneasily with a covenantal account of mutual love. Still, at one point his framework supplies exactly what the argument needs against its sharpest critic. Bloom's strongest

[22]For the priority of ethics to ontology, see Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 42–48, and the radicalization in *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).

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objection is that empathy is partial: a spotlight that illumines the one before me and leaves the many in darkness. Levinas anticipates the difficulty under the name of *le tiers*, the third party. The face of the "other" is never encountered in isolation; the third is always already present, and the third introduces the demand for comparison, measure, and justice alongside the immediate claim of the neighbour.[23] Justice, then, extends the face-to-face relation to all the others whom the third represents, rather than suspending it. Ordered empathy is, therefore, not condemned to parochialism. The same perception that registers the claim of the sufferer before me registers, through the third, the claim of those beyond my sightline. The remedy for empathy's narrowness is not less perception but a perception disciplined by justice, which is the philosophical form of the pro-life intuition that the visible victim and the unseen victim are both bearers of a claim.

Augustine's *Ordo Amoris*: Order, Not Restraint

The phenomenological account answers the mechanistic and voluntarist assumptions. It does not yet answer the practical dilemma in the terms the anti-empathy theology poses it, the dilemma of restraint against indulgence, of how much feeling is safe. For that the argument turns to Augustine, whose treatment of love reframes the question so thoroughly that the dilemma dissolves.

Augustine's governing category is not the quantity of love but its order. Virtue, on his account, is a matter of loving the right things in the right measure, and vice a matter of disordered love, love fastened on the wrong object or holding a lesser good above a greater. The formulation in *City of God* is compressed and exact: "*definitio brevis et vera virtutis ordo est amoris*," which Bettenson renders, "a brief and true definition of virtue is 'rightly ordered love.'"[24] The taxonomy

[23]The theme is anticipated in *Totality and Infinity* but receives its developed form in Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), where the entry of the third party (*le tiers*) gives rise to comparison, measure, and the demand for justice.

[24] Augustine, *City of God* 15.22, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003).

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of *De doctrina christiana* clarifies the point through the distinction between *uti* and *frui*, using and enjoying. Created things are to be used as that which leads the soul toward the enjoyment of God, who alone is to be enjoyed for his own sake; disorder enters when the means of ascent becomes the terminus, when what should be used is enjoyed and the soul rests in the creature.[25]

This reframing dismantles the empathy dilemma at the root. Anti-empathy theology presents the alternative as one of degree: feeling is dangerous in proportion to its strength, and the safe path lies in its reduction. Augustine denies that the question is one of degree at all. Disordered empathy is vicious whatever its quantity: the empathy that loves the comfort of its own tenderness more than the good of the neighbour, or that collapses into the sufferer and so loves a fused image of the self rather than the "other," is disordered not because it is too much but because it is wrongly directed. Ordered empathy, by contrast, is the form charity takes when it perceives a sufferer: love that moves toward the neighbour as the neighbour is, under God, and for the neighbour's good. Such love is measured by a *telos* rather than a thermostat, and the *telos* has a name. The rightly ordered love that Augustine defines as virtue is love conformed to the One in whom the order of all loves is given and restored.

Bonhoeffer's *Stellvertretung*: The Christological Form of Empathy

Phenomenology describes the structure of empathy; theology must name its perfection. Bonhoeffer supplies the name. From his earliest work to his last, the organizing concept of his ethics is *Stellvertretung*, vicarious representative action, the act of standing in the place of another while remaining oneself. In *Sanctorum Communio* it is the structural principle of the church as a

[25] Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* I.22–28. On the structure of *uti* and *frui* and its later misreadings, see Oliver O'Donovan, "Usus and Fruitio in Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana I," *Journal of Theological Studies* 33 (1982): 361–397.

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community of persons who bear one another; in the *Ethics* it is the form of all responsible life, grounded in the deed of Christ, who acts in the place of humanity not by ceasing to be Himself and not by absorbing humanity into Himself, but by bearing humanity's burden as the one He is for the sake of the "others" as they are.[26] The structure is non-fusional by definition. Representation that dissolved the representative into the represented would not represent; it would only duplicate. To stand in another's place is to remain "other" than the one for whom one stands.

Stellvertretung is thus the theological completion of what Stein described phenomenologically. What the phenomenology establishes as a structure of perception, the doctrine consummates as a structure of love and act: to bear the other's burden while remaining "other" is precisely to perceive the "other" as "other" and to move toward that "other" in his irreducibility. The empathy that Stein vindicates against the charge of fusion finds in Bonhoeffer's representation its ethical and Christological perfection.

The exegetical anchor is the kenotic hymn. "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."[27] The grammar of the passage is the grammar of representation, not of fusion. The self-emptying (ἐκένωσεν) is an emptying of status, the relinquishing of the

[26]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), on *Stellvertretung* as the principle of the church-community; and *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), in the section "History and Good," where vicarious representative action is named the basis of responsibility.

[27]Phil 2:5–8 (ESV).

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morphē theou for the *morphē doulou*, and not an emptying of selfhood; the one who takes the form of a servant remains the one who was in the form of God.[28] The kenosis is the movement of one who remains himself toward those who are "other" than himself, for their sake, to the point of death. That is why Paul frames it as an imperative of the mind, τοῦτο φρονεῖτε (*touto phroneite*), "have this mind among yourselves" (Phil 2:5): the mindedness of Christ is the disposition the community is commanded to share, an orientation toward the "other" that perceives and bears without appropriating. Empathy, on this reading, is participation in the kenotic movement of the Son. It is cruciform rather than weak, the strength of a love that can draw near to suffering without being mastered by it, because it does not need to defend itself by distance.

Empathy and the *Imago Dei*: A Relational Ontology

The argument has shown that empathy, correctly understood, is non-appropriative perception (Stein), pre-volitional moral claim (Levinas), rightly ordered love (Augustine), and cruciform representation (Bonhoeffer). It remains to show why this capacity is constitutive of the *imago Dei*, and not an optional refinement upon it. The answer requires a decision about the nature of the image, a decision that recent theology has prepared.

The dominant patristic and medieval tradition located the image in a faculty, most often reason, possessed by the individual substance. A substantialist reading of this kind has the merit of grounding the dignity of every human being in something each one *has*, independent of relations that may or may not obtain, and the worry that attends every relational account is that it will make

[28]On the kenosis as the relinquishing of status rather than of deity, and on the identity-Christology of the hymn, see Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). The reading coheres with the wider Pauline summons to bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2).

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dignity contingent on actual relating and so imperil those whose capacity for relation is impaired.[29] This concern is serious, and it should be honoured. Yet, the exegetical and theological case for a relational and vocational reading is strong, and it can accommodate the concern. Genesis presents the image as a calling: "Then God said, 'Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness,'" and the verses that follow specify the likeness in terms of representation and rule.[30] In the ancient Near Eastern (ANE) world the *tselem* (צֶלֶם) of a king was the image set in a territory to make the absent sovereign present and to exercise his rule; humanity is the *tselem* of God, placed in the garden-temple of creation to represent the invisible Sovereign and to govern as he governs.[31] The image is, therefore, a vocation of representation before it is a possession of faculties, and a vocation is not forfeited by the impairment of the capacities through which it is exercised, any more than an ambassador ceases to be an ambassador when he sleeps.

If the image is vocational representation, then it is irreducibly relational in a further and deeper sense, for the God whom the image represents is Himself a communion. The relational reading developed by Barth, Grenz, and Zizioulas locates the ground of the image in the I-Thou structure of a humanity made to correspond to the triune life, never in an isolated capacity. Barth reads the image as the "basic form of humanity," the being of the one who is with and for the "other" in answer to the God who is eternally with and for Himself in the relations of Father, Son,

[29]The objection is pressed, in defense of a non-relational grounding of dignity, by John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015). The reply offered here grants Kilner's pastoral concern and meets it through the category of vocation rather than that of exercised relation.

[30]Gen 1:26 (NRSVUE).

[31]J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), on the royal-functional and representational sense of *tselem* against its ANE background.

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and Spirit.[32] Grenz develops the social analogy into a Trinitarian theology of the relational self, and Zizioulas grounds personhood as such in communion, so that to be a person is to be in relation, after the pattern of the divine *koinonia*.[33] Read against this background, empathy belongs to the image as the proper exercise of its office. It is the affective and perceptual operation of a being made to perceive and to move toward the "other" as "other," in correspondence to a God whose own life is the perfect non-appropriative knowing and self-giving of the divine persons one to another. The claim needs a careful boundary, lest the argument re-import the anthropology it opposes. Empathy is no competence that qualifies one for the image, as though those unable to perform it imaged God the less; that would be the capacity-criterion in fresh dress. The image is the office; empathy is the office discharged. Impairment of the capacity cancels the image no more than sleep cancels an ambassador, and the dignity of the one who cannot empathize rests, like every dignity named here, on the calling rather than its execution. What the withholding of empathy defaces is therefore a vocation and not a credential, the office held open and yet refused.

Jesus is the image *par excellence*, "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation," and the destiny of the redeemed is to be conformed to that image.[34] The image fractured in the first Adam is restored in the second, and the restoration takes the shape already traced: the kenotic perception of and movement toward the "other". Empathy is, therefore, the human

[32]Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2, trans. Harold Knight et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), §45, "The Basic Form of Humanity."

[33]Stanley J. Grenz, The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

[34]Col 1:15 (NRSVUE); cf. Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18.

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enactment, in the power of the Spirit and after the pattern of the Son, of the very relationality that the image names. To withhold it is not a lapse of temperament but a defacement of the image, a refusal of the office for which humanity was made. In the vocabulary of my earlier work, the withholding of empathy turns the *eikōn* toward the *eidōlon*: the image that was to represent the living God toward the neighbour becomes instead a closed and self-referential thing, present to "others" as a profile, a category, or a threat, but no longer as a face.[35]

A single trajectory now becomes visible across two projects. The instrumental inversion I diagnosed elsewhere makes the person a resource, a standing-reserve to be optimized, and so denies the creaturely interdependence the image names by treating the "other" as material. The anti-empathy posture denies the same interdependence from the opposite direction, by treating the "other" as a threat from whom the self must be insulated. The two are mirror-failures of one anthropology. Empathy, rightly ordered, is the positive content of the limit that both transgress: the perception and bearing of the "other" as an irreducible "other," which is what it is to be made in the image of a God who is, in and of Himself, communion.

Conclusion: Moral Formation in a Polarized Age

Taken together, Stein, Levinas, Augustine, and Bonhoeffer describe one disciplined act, and their convergence dissolves the fear from which the anti-empathy theology sets out. Stein shows how the "other" survives the act of feeling-with, so that the boundary the critics would defend is held more firmly by empathy rather than detachment. Levinas locates the neighbour's

[35]On the *eikōn–eidōlon* distinction as the difference between an image that opens toward its source and one that closes upon itself, see Sutherland, *From Babel to AI*, and "Tech Beyond Its Maker."

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claim before deliberation and, through the third party, widens it to all whom justice represents. Augustine supplies the order that parts empathy from its sentimental double. Bonhoeffer gives the act its Christological form, the kenotic representation that bears the "other" without absorbing him. What these together describe is moral perception under the discipline of truth, what Iris Murdoch called a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality.[36] The discipline is no quantity of restraint laid upon a dangerous affect; it is the order, the justice, and the cruciform shape that make the perception the act it is.

A community that has learned to call empathy a sin will form leaders who mistake hardness for clarity and absence for strength, and it will train the wounded to read their own perception of harm as the vice that disqualifies their testimony. A community formed in the empathy here described will perceive the claim of the neighbour before it manages the neighbour's account, will hold the immediate sufferer and the unseen sufferer within a single field of justice, and will bear the burden of the "other" without dissolving into it or recoiling from it. Such formation is not a softening of conviction. It is conviction given its proper object, since the truth that the church is charged to tell is a truth about persons, and persons are perceived through the very capacity the anti-empathy theology would excise.

[36]Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 34, defining attention as "a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality." Murdoch develops the concept from Simone Weil; see Weil, *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951). The convergence of phenomenological, Augustinian, and Weilian "attention" with the theological account offered here is not accidental, since all describe the perception of the irreducible other.

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The argument ends where Christian anthropology must end, at the face of the One who is the image. The shortest sentence in the Gospels places tears on that face: "Jesus wept."[37] The tears are wept according to the humanity he assumed, yet by the communication of idioms they are predicated of the one person of the Son, so that it is God incarnate who weeps, the divine impassibility unviolated and the divine compassion unfeigned. The weeping discloses his strength rather than betraying it, the perception of and movement toward the grief of friends by the One who will in a moment command the grave. To be conformed to that image, to bear the *eikōn* of the invisible God toward the neighbour, is to recover empathy not as weakness but as the cruciform virtue the image has required from the very beginning. The disparaged virtue is, on inspection, the disowned image; its rehabilitation is the church's return to its own face.

[37]John 11:35 (ESV).

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