An introduction to Moritz Geiger’s psychological contribution on empathy

FLORIAN GÖDEL
Friedrich-Schiller-Universität, Jena (Germany)

Moritz Geiger is known for his work in aesthetics, while his contribution to psychology is rarely cited. There are biographical as well as theoretical reasons for this. However, his project of a Phenomenological Psychology of “pure self-given factuality”, in contrast to Husserl’s idealism of consciousness, deserves to be re-discovered. Here an early work on empathy is briefly presented and discussed in the context of Geiger’s life and theoretical development, arguing that later ideas are already present in this contribution, although only later they will be developed more deeply.

Key words: Empathy, psychology, philosophy, phenomenology.

INTRODUCTION

The name of Moritz Geiger does not appear very often in today’s philosophical publications, and his ideas about the psychological science at the beginning of the 20th century are today almost forgotten. Certainly, there are several reasons for this. On the one hand, there are biographical reasons: Moritz Geiger was born July 26th 1880 in Frankfurt am Main. He began his studies in 1898 in Munich and changed his subject several times. Starting with law, he subsequently became interested in the history of literature, and finally in the philosophy and psychology of Theodor Lipps. Although he initially embraced the ideas of Lipps, after reading Edmund Husserl’s “Logische Untersuchungen” (1901) he left Munich to Göttingen in order to personally listen to the lectures of the founder of the phenomenological method. Geiger adheres to Husserl’s ideas in their original form. Later, he abandons Husserl when the latter turns towards the idealism of consciousness. In contrast, Geiger sustains a special phenomenological method of “pure self-given factuality”, “without limitation by sensual-visible or idealistic prejudices, without basing the reality on a lower, not-given sphere. For phenomenology every given fact values equally, independent from whether it is sensual or not. Its principle is the affirmation of a maximum of factuality [...]. For this principle, it immolates even the demand of systematicity of the given existence” (Zeltner, 1960, p.455). Subsequently, Geiger returns to Munich and participates in the “Munich Circle”. Several publications follow as well as an appointment to the University of Munich and finally Göttingen.

In 1933 Geiger emigrates in the USA, because he refuses to give up his academic functions at the University of Göttingen, as the Nazis require him to do due to his Jewish descent. In the USA he cannot manage to integrate into the academic system, although he already had been a visiting professor at Stanford in 1926. At the end he is active at the Vassar College. Geiger died rather early, at the age of 57 years, during a car trip near Seal Harbor, N.Y.

But not only the personal misfortunes have contributed to the oblivion of Geiger. On the other hand, he is known today only for being the founder and sustainer of a phenomenological aesthetic. His attempt to fructify the phenomenological method also for psychology was condemned to trail off tonelessly due to the antitheoretical empiricism of the science of his time. Geiger was aware of how risky his venture could be, but he believed unshakably that the dominion of positivistic thinking had to find an end and he
saw clearly the methodical flaws of an overhasty empiricism:

“The composition of psychological science is full of immanent metaphysic: This is not only valid for those scientists who confess ingenuously their systematical basis before starting their investigations, but likewise for those who have written on their banners empiricism and nothing but empiricism.” (Geiger, cited in: Zeltner, 1960, p.457).

Consequently, also the empiricist has to clarify his methods and terms, because, if he does not, he risks losing the credibility of his investigations.

It is exactly this basic problem of clarifying the key terms of the (psychological) research, which Geiger treats in his lecture on empathy (Geiger, 1910/2015). It was presented at the 4th Congress for experimental Psychology in Innsbruck. Geiger gives this lecture after his habilitation in Munich but before he receives the call to be an adjunct professor in 1915. In addition, his great phenomenological works about aesthetics and psychology appear years later. Nevertheless, in the lecture on empathy can already be found many of his ideas, which will be more deeply developed in later works. The influence of the Phenomenology of Husserl is supposed to be recognized right in the title: “About the essence and the meaning of empathy”. The lecture starts with a comprehensive description of the different concepts of empathy. Empathy is contextualized in the whole wide panorama of the time and arranged in a depiction which contains all previous attempts of definition and comprehension of this concept. This starts from the origin of the term in Romanticism and goes on to the ideas of Geiger’s teacher, Theodor Lipps. The range is wide, from aesthetics to evolutionary theory. With it, it can be noticed a vertical order due to a chronological development, and a horizontal order according to the intuition of empathy. This second order leads from the phenomenal fact of “foreign expressive movements” and the “foreign personality” across the – deeply romantically influenced – treatment of the “animation of subhuman entities”, to end with the aesthetical aspects of empathy.

Precisely the last two facets of the concept seem to flee the common responsibility of a psychological science. Despite that, Geiger adheres to their treatment, because he wants to base the psychological investigation of empathy on a conceptual save ground.

The critic on Geiger’s remarks of empathy deals primary with this last point. The participants of the Congress mostly cannot understand why it would be relevant for the scientific research to treat also aesthetical concepts of empathy or even the probably esoteric aspect of the “animation of subhuman entities”. And even if you do not agree with such criticisms, you shall admit that the weak point of the argumentation is revealed here: in the abundance of definitions and theories on empathy, Geiger does not give a proper position, a personal comment to the value of the single uses of the term. Despite the encyclopedic structure of the text, one misses the intervening mind of the author, who sustains the relevance or irrelevance of a hypothesis.

But surely it would be too simple believing that Geiger had overlooked this point. It is more probable that a characteristic trait of his philosophy becomes evident here in a problematic way. Hermann Zeltner describes Geiger as a cautious thinker with an aristocratic calmness, who cares more about a precise and impeccable formulation than loudness and rhetoric. A thinker who observes genially, even in a “subtle” way, who registers and differentiates sensibly, but who never uses unnecessarily long or pompous speech. These precious qualities turn to his disadvantage in this case: In his intellectual caution he prefers the completeness of the collection of the concepts of empathy and neglects a clear orientation for future research in this field. In addition, also his phenomenological method of “pure self-given factuality” and equalization of anything which is given, certainly contributes to the absence of a proper point of view. The value of Geiger’s remarks is, consequently, more visible when you recognize this completeness as something that could also be seen in a positive way. It is true that the reader has to bear the responsibility of deciding between the single standpoints on empathy without recommendations of the author, but this is just the condition to measure the opinions independently and to become qualified in the matter of empathy.

The ego is the center of questions, Geiger asks on the various concepts of empathy to find at the
end the very “essence” of the phenomenon: empathy is always given for a subject and gets its sense only from the linking to the center of all psychical occurrences, the ego. Only in this way all the single phenomena can be united into one “psychology of the entire human being” (Geiger, 1930, p.9).

This thought, which remains implicit in the 1910 lecture, was developed in the successive “Fragment über den Begriff des Unbewussten und die psychische Realität” (Geiger, 1930). There it is proposed a psychology of an “immanent realism” which, in contrast to the “Psychology of experience” [Erlebnispsychologie], does not dismember the psyche in a causal succession of single experiences [Erlebnisse], but grasps it as a “real unity with real factors [...], as a dynamic unity with an ego as center” (Geiger, 1930, p.1).

Unfortunately, the path that Geiger treads here ends in the fog of uncertainty: in fact, he dies before having completed his project of a “psychology of the entire human being”.

REFERENCES

Corresponding Author:
Florian Gödel
Friedrich-Schiller-Universität
Hinter der Kirche 7, 07743 Jena, Germany
E-mail: florian.goedel92@gmx.de
Phone: 0049 (0)173 9959508

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