

RICERCHE

Experiencing the Other. How Expressivity and Value-based Perception Provide a Non-solipsistic Account of Empathy

Maria Chiara Bruttomesso^(α)

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Abstract The problem of intersubjectivity has undergone multifold discussions in the philosophical, neuroscientific and psychological fields. Currently, the predominant theories in this ongoing debate contend that simulation or explicit reasoning must ground other-understanding. Yet this contention confines the subject to solipsistic self-projection without actual communication. I will provide an analysis suggesting that the roots of the concept of “empathy” reveal not only a dualistic inner-outer distinction but also an emerging reference to the bodily dimension. I claim that, by examining the verifiable-in-experience ideas of expressivity and dynamical value-based perception, the limits of the *Theory Theory* (TT) and of the *Simulation Theory* (ST) are resolved by means of a direct perceptual encounter that implies a unitary and never-isolated subject. I aim at showing that perception-based empathy provides an adequate basis for considering social dimensions from intersubjectivity to shared agency, since it allows for both direct embodied communication in cooperation and for the autonomy of agents involved in a collective domain.
KEYWORDS: Empathy; Expressivity; Embodiment; Perception; Collective Intentionality

Riassunto *Esperire l'altro. Come espressività e percezione fondata sul valore forniscono un approccio non solipsistico all'empatia* – Il problema dell'intersoggettività è stato oggetto di diversi dibattiti in ambito filosofico, neuroscientifico e psicologico. Le teorie oggi dominanti sostengono che debba essere la simulazione o il ragionamento esplicito il fondamento della comprensione dell'altro. Tuttavia, questa discussione confina il soggetto in una solipsistica proiezione di sé, priva di reale comunicazione. Proporrò un'analisi che suggerisce come le radici del concetto di “empatia” rivelino non solo una distinzione dualista tra interno ed esterno, ma anche un riferimento emergente alla dimensione corporea. Sosterrò che, esaminando concetti verificabili nell'esperienza quali espressività e percezione dinamica fondata sul valore, i limiti della *Theory Theory* (TT) e della *Simulation Theory* (ST) vengono dissolti dall'incontro percettivo diretto, che considera il soggetto come unitario e mai isolato. Intendo mostrare come l'empatia fondata sulla percezione costituisca un'adeguata base per considerare dimensioni sociali differenti, dall'intersoggettività all'agentività condivisa, poiché riconosce in entrambe una comunicazione diretta incarnata, che rispetta la cooperazione, ma anche l'autonomia, degli agenti coinvolti in dominio collettivo.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Empatia; Espressività; Embodiment; Percezione; Intenzionalità collettiva

^(α)Dipartimento di Scienze Umane, Università degli Studi di Verona, Lungadige Porta Vittoria, 17 - 37129 Verona (I)

E-mail: mariachiara.bruttomesso@univr.com (✉)



Introduction

WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS FOR the *constitution* of a subject? Is this “subject” a monadological, non-contradictory and self-centered entity? These simple questions are of central importance to contemporary debates, and demand a reconsideration of the embodied dimension of every living being. Our first experiences when we are born unfold as the whole repertoire of our perceptions shifts dramatically: for the first time, we must use our lungs to breathe and obtain oxygen; as we “slide” into the world we experience novel tactile stimulation; once we are outside the womb we have our first direct intersubjective interactions, and we begin a continuous learning or teaching-and-learning relationship with the environment and other living beings.

As I will show, our bodily structure is the definitive source of all value-based perception and the root of all I-cans that shape our possibilities for interacting with the world; this bodily structure is *not* a static essence that binds us within a “physical” prison separated from a “mental” dimension. On the contrary, it requires continuous change, adaptation and learning through direct contact with people and situations. In a similar way, the social embodied relationships we have from our earliest days will influence our motor development, our personality and attitudes towards the world. An infant is primarily in contact with the image of the other, even before it can look at the image of its own body;¹ moreover, social and affective relationships teach it to move into a shared environment, that can support or damage its development.² As I will argue, interaction through facial expressions, gestures and movements, i.e., embodied relations, constitutes the fertile terrain in which one cultivates a never-crystallized subjectivity, driving towards a solution to the solipsistic bias that many theories of empathy fall prey to.

Social contact involves a direct dimension that is largely ignored in the main explanations of intersubjectivity offered by today’s

philosophy of mind, which split an individual’s embodied and mental dimensions; this conception, however, theoretically withdraws the subject into a private and inaccessible sphere, without any actual possibility for direct interaction with any other person. The following short excursus on the origins of the concept of empathy will develop into a detailed account of the reasons why one should criticize both *Simulation Theory* and *Theory Theory* as incorrect and self-confining. At the same time, I intend to provide an interactive account of the intersubjective relationship that is shaped by and, in turn, continuously shapes the embodied, unitary dimension of everyday human experience.

A bias regarding the “who”: A revision of the concept of empathy

The long-discussed concept of *empathy*, which has undergone and still arouses bitter debates, clearly has not yet achieved an unambiguous definition. This problem with the meaning of empathy, inherited from both the Greek (*empathēia*) and the German (*Einfühlung*), is a tacitly presupposed dualism. “*Empathēia*” literally implies to “feel inside” someone, that is to say, it refers to the possibility of experiencing another’s emotions. A spatial connotation is therefore involved, as if we could transport ourselves literally “inside” this person, adopt her perspective and feel what she does.

A careful look at Plato’s *Ion* reveals that a specific concept of empathy was used to define the identification of the audience with the rhapsode, a feeling that the rhapsode himself could recognize in his audience by looking at their emotional reactions: if they reacted by crying, being appalled and exhibited astonished expressions, it meant that he was correctly guiding them into the world of the declaimed epic poem (which he himself had to feel part of, displaying the appropriate emotional responses). Aristotle’s *Poetics* suggests the public “suffers with” a tragic hero in a theatrical piece; the drama leads the audi-

ence to a detachment from passions through a process of *katharsis*.

Like the Greek one, the German term contains the concept of “feeling inside” (*Einfühlen*), but it derives from a Romantic notion of universal attunement with nature and mankind. In fact, this term made its first appearance in one of Johann Gottfried Herder’s works as *hinein fühlen*, an expression which means that we can feel ourselves only *in* the others.³ *Einfühlung* was the term then coined by Robert Vischer, the philosopher of aesthetics, who claimed that we can feel a universal sympathy for mankind through empathy with another human being.⁴

Both the Greek and German terms for empathy presuppose a “movement”, if it can be so defined, *inside* a person, that is to say, they assume an uncommunicative distinction between inside and outside, in which only the inside is the *real* location of feelings, emotions, thoughts, intentions. It is not a surprise, therefore, that theorizers of this kind of “movement” either overlook the embodied level or consider it to be a source for a process of simulation through which the other’s intentions, feelings, etc. can be understood. Both conceptions present a common dualistic bias in considering the individual to be split between, for instance, body and mind, mind and brain, reason and emotion, movement and meaning, or external appearance and internal states. A significant example of the first type of perspective, which underestimates the embodied dimension, can be found in Descartes’ *Second Meditation on First Philosophy*. In his view, not only is the human being considered to be a sum of body and mind, but also intersubjective encounters with people in the lived world are considered to be abstractions from a process that splits appearance and reasoning:

If I look out the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves [...] Yet, do I see more than hats and coats which would conceal

automatons? I *judge* that they are men.⁵

A dualistic conception certainly emerges, at some of the various levels described (mind/body, appearance/internal states, movement/meaning). Human actions in this perspective are meaningful only through reasoning: appearance cannot be trusted and only judgment can provide a correct comprehension of a situation, which means that we cannot be directly acquainted with our fellow men but must instead *infer* they are fellows.

The second case refers to the use of our own body as a source of simulation. It was supported by Theodor Lipps who, in his works about empathy, argued that it is a spontaneous and instinctive process.⁶ He thought that if we saw an acrobat walking on a rope, we would immediately feel an inner imitation of his movements. We begin to see here the first clues for an approach to empathy as a relationship between two embodied subjects, even though the other’s intentions, according to Lipps, can only be accessed in a mediated way. In other words, Lipps’ perspective functions as an intermediary position in the transition from dualism to non-dualism.

The above-mentioned biases in interpreting the intersubjective relationship find clear manifestations in the two theories that are currently predominant in cognitive sciences, *Theory Theory* (TT) and *Simulation Theory* (ST). The first can be considered to be derived from a certain Cartesian dualism. As regards Descartes’ quoted example, the TT claims that empathic ability consists in conscious and inferential judgments about another’s mental states. A well-known reference is the Maxi Test, created by Wimmer and Perner,⁷ in which children are supposed to make a correct inference about a puppet’s mental states, by putting themselves “in its shoes”. More specifically, the puppet sees the child’s mother hiding some chocolate in a location, but the chocolate is moved to a different location when the doll leaves the stage. In order to solve the test successfully, the child should correctly infer that the puppet

will look for the chocolate in the first location it observed and not in the new location. This test therefore aims to measure the child's ability to detect a false belief, using a «representation as a frame of reference for interpreting or anticipating the other person's actions».⁸ This ability usually arises between four and six years of age, and ignores any embodied interaction prior to that age as significant for the understanding of the other.

The second main category of empathic accounts, *Simulation Theory*, is rooted in the argument from analogy, because of the reference to one's own feelings in order to understand the other. It is of course a schematization, since there are various different viewpoints inside this definition. Among the major theorists, it is important to mention the explicit simulation theory of Alvin Goldman. He supports «a blend of ST and TT, with emphasis on simulation»,⁹ and his explanation of empathy can be summed up in three main points. First, the empathizer creates in herself pretend states. Second, she uses imagination to develop them. Third, the process is built up in order to assign and attribute the pretend states to the other person, so that Goldman's theory represents a simulation theory grounded in conscious inferences. Yet the problem of incommunicability leads to apparent solipsistic problems: how could one be sure that the simulated emotions correspond to the ones experienced by the other subject, if she can only "imagine" them? How would the empathizer exit from her own monad, if the other is encountered and interpreted by self-projection? Does our experience work on explicit inferences, when dealing with embodied social contacts?

One of the major supporters of an implicit version of ST is the Italian neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese. His interpretation of "mirror" neurons, discovered when he was a member of Rizzolatti's research team, maintains that these neurons "fire" when someone sees an action because her motor system implicitly *simulates* the action as she observes it. Gallese's "as if" system can be defined as subpersonal and rela-

tional: «Although we do not overtly reproduce the observed action, nevertheless our motor system becomes active *as if* we were executing that very same action that we are observing».¹⁰ This theory of empathy focuses therefore on an embodied subject. However, both the ST and the TT imply some phenomenological contradictions.

I can better explain these impasses using an example taken from a common situation. You are sitting in the train when another person enters your compartment and lifts her suitcase toward the baggage-designated space above the seats. Her hands start to shake, her back arches in an odd way, she wrinkles her eyebrows while her mouth assumes a grimace. She repeatedly tries to lift the suitcase and her movements become clumsier and clumsier, her facial features more and more contracted. Do you need an explicit inference to realize that she is having trouble lifting her suitcase up, or a simulation in which you project yourself into the same situation? Don't you have an *immediate* grasp of her intention and her way of dealing with it? You surely do not need to stop and sum up her observable bodily elements *plus* the specific situation *plus* a theory on the mental states that she may be experiencing, nor do you have to project yourself into this other person in order to guess what she is going through.

Let us focus now on the implicit version of Gallese's ST, to pinpoint why his postulated account of the embodied dimension and the non-neutrality of perception appears contradictory. Though he avoids a notion of inferential pretense by restoring the role of bodies in intersubjectivity, I think that his view of neural simulation poses a twofold problem.

1) Gallese's interpretation of the mirror-system means that for him «action observation implies *action simulation*»,¹¹ thus giving phenomenological importance to a neural structure, in other words, to a structure that cannot have any experience. His theory of *embodied simulation*

presupposes that action understanding is rooted in action simulating, since «[t]hese perceptual qualities are the intentional correlates of the motor potentialities expressed by our situated body».¹² Even though this claim seems to refer to a phenomenological dimension, reminiscent of Husserl's notions of *Paarung* and bodily *I-cans*, the neuroscientist tacitly raises the mirror system to the rank of consciousness, since the firing of some cortical areas is seen as a direct pre-noetic experience of simulation. Yet, there is a clear difference between "neural" (sub-personal) and "pre-noetic" (already phenomenological, experienced).

- 2) In the above mentioned quotation, Gallese refers to perception, highlighting its embodied correlation with our motor dynamical structure. I certainly agree with his claim that perception is non-neutral and rooted in the body, but his theory seems to give a simulation-in-perception account, that is, to imply either that other-perception could not be accomplished without a neural simulation, or that other-perception is ultimately this same neural simulation. Therefore, some questions might be raised concerning this second problem: how could one ever simulate something that she has not initially perceived? And, admitting that simulation follows perception, why would one need to go back to her own bodily self to be able to interpret another's action or feeling, if the task has already been accomplished by a direct perceptual encounter?

In so far as ST and TT presuppose a direct acquaintance with one's own self but a mediated contact with the other, they both derive from the argument from analogy, since a more or less tacit self-reference is implied.¹³ In this sense, it would be possible only to guess what the other is experiencing: subjects would be confined within a solipsistic sphere with no real contact with others, that

is to say that our only ability to enter into contact with others, from this perspective, seems to be to project our own experiences into them. As Zahavi clearly asserts,

will a process of simulation ever allow for a true understanding of the other or will it merely let me attain an understanding of myself in a different situation? As for the theory theory of mind, one could for instance question some of its empirical claims and implications. If a theory of mind is required for the experience of minded beings, then any creature that lacks such a theory will also lack both self-experience and experience of others.¹⁴

After this focus on the philosophical roots of empathy, I will examine some intuitions offered by phenomenology in order to reach a non-solipsistic view of the problem. Though the other would lose her otherness if we had complete access to her *Erlebnis*, a rediscovery of the concepts of expression and of values can provide a different view of intersubjective perception and therefore an exit from the "no-windows" monadological sphere.

Body-reading. A phenomenological view of empathy as interaction between embodied subjects

Going back to the origins of empathy, in Plato's *Ion* the rhapsode declaiming in front of the public, already acknowledges the very direct importance of the public's expression, which is perceived as having a specific meaning for him. If the audience cries while listening, it means the rhapsode will laugh when receiving the money for his performance. But if he sees the audience laughing, it means he will cry about not being successful and therefore not getting paid.¹⁵ In order to shed new light on the intersubjective relationship from a phenomenological point of view, I think that the notion of *expression* may clarify why we can directly perceive the other. As I try to demonstrate, by acknowledging the role of

expression we can escape the solipsistic impasse of the argument from analogy and its ST and TT developments, and provide a way to consider empathy as a real embodied encounter with emotions, feelings, meaningful actions and so on, rather than as mind-reading or a guess by projection.

As becomes clear from its etymological roots, the German word *Ausdruck* (expression) means literally to “push out” (a feeling, an emotion, an intention). In such a phenomenon, according to Max Scheler, the feeling comes to be directly *present* in the expression or, in other words, the expression is part of the emotion itself. This implies that we do not perceive in a split-driven manner – *first* a physical body and *then* an emotion. On the contrary, the *Körper* (material body) is an abstraction of the *Leib* (lived body). For this reason, the subject is captured as an expressive unity (*Ausdruckseinheit*), inherently embodied, and the first step in social contact appears to be immediate and tangible. As the philosopher wrote,

For we certainly believe ourselves to be directly acquainted with another person’s joy in his laughter, with his sorrow and pain in his tears [...] If anyone tells me that this is not “perception” (*Fremd-Wahrnehmung*) [...] I would beg him to turn aside from such questionable theories and address himself to the phenomenological facts.¹⁶

Rather than a simulation or a theory, the very basis of empathy involves a peculiar kind of perception, focused on movements and expressions in which the meaning is neither hidden nor added in retrospect. As Dan Zahavi pointed out, a phenomenological approach to intersubjectivity should describe the direct encounter with the other, and by so doing go towards an elimination of the illusory problem of other *minds*.¹⁷ Zahavi proposed in this article that we go *beyond empathy* and criticized the empathic model, conceived as a thematic encounter between subjects, but more recently

he has used this same term to refer to intersubjective contact. He characterizes empathy as a directly experienceable social dimension and he inserts it in a Phenomenological Proposal that reconsiders the importance of embodied interaction and mutual influence between non-static subjects. In the form of a “Phenomenological Proposal” or “Direct Perception”, a third alternative to TT and ST is starting to converge with the expressive, perceptive dimension described by Scheler.¹⁸

To claim that empathy is grounded on a peculiar form of perception does not imply that the other is entirely transparent, or that I can have a first-person experience of her feelings.¹⁹ Since the subject has a private dimension, her otherness is preserved, but an interactive account based on direct perception explains how real communication is possible starting from the basic level. The *problem of other minds*, a phrase that suggests the invisibility of hidden mental states in an inner dimension or in mere neural processes, reveals itself, instead, as a bodily-integrated matter. Considering the subject as an *inseparable* unity of corporeal, kinetic and mental opens up the possibility for direct social acquaintance, since the contact we can achieve does not take place with a mere physical appearance split from beliefs or emotions.

The possibility of reaching the other through intersubjectivity without eliminating the other’s transcendence is particularly remarkable in Husserl’s works. This is to say, although we are bodily interconnected with others, we cannot have a first-person perspective of their own experiences. In this sense, for Husserl empathy differs from originally given perception: if phenomenology is to explain the intersubjective problem without reducing the other to myself, then the constitutive distance can be defined as *appresentation*, or *analogical apperception*. Which is, however, a matter of passive synthesis, a *pairing* between two similar embodied subjects and not at all a form of analogical reasoning.²⁰ If ego and alter-ego are associated through an original pairing, as we read in *Ideas II* and

Cartesian Meditations, could it be said that Husserl refuses a theory of social perception completely? The father of phenomenology tends to give slightly different characterizations in his works, stating alternatively that there is or is not a possibility of perceiving the other.²¹ Although apperception and transcendence would not allow for Husserl to speak of direct perception, in the same year (1913) Husserl and Scheler were both acknowledging the role of expression, respectively in *Ideas II* and in the first version of the *Sympatiebuch*. Consider the following statements from Husserl's *Ideas II*:

expression appresents psychic existence in Corporeality, thus there is constituted with all that an objectivity which is precisely double and unitary: the man – without “introjection”.²²

Concerning the experience of others, every person, in virtue of his Body, stands within a spatial nexus, among things, and to each Body for itself there pertains the person's entire psychic life, grasped in empathy in a determinate way, so that therefore if the Body moves and occupies ever new places, the soul, too, as it were, co-moves. The soul is indeed ever one with the Body (*sie ist ja mit dem Leib ständig eins*).²³

If we compare this with the well-known paragraph on expressivity in Scheler's *The Nature of Sympathy*²⁴ quoted above, the same attention to the unity between psychic and physical dimensions means going beyond any Cartesian automaton. Clearly, the two mentioned phenomenologists claim a different level of *unmittelbarkeit* in social perception, though neither of them is attempting to reduce the other to the self. On the contrary, both theories give us a hint about how to rephrase our everyday experience. When we catch a movement from a human being, we automatically perceive it in a non-neutral way, with a pre-reflective focus on expressivi-

ty that *does not allow us to split* a movement or an expression from its meaning. The researched “mental state”, at least as concerns the basic emotions and intentions, is *present* for Scheler in the expression. Phenomenology demands a reconsideration of the empathic process, based on a fundamentally non-dualistic approach that cannot rely on simulation or inferences. When we see someone walking, the fact that she has bent shoulders, a slow step, that her eyes and lips are turned slightly downwards, is immediately an index of her mood, without any need to sum up clues or make either an inference, or a simulation in our own body. Moreover, how could we ever expect to simulate correctly something that we have not yet perceived? It is perfectly understandable, therefore, that Shaun Gallagher defines perception as smart, informed and enactive.²⁵ If we were asked to define what we see, our answer would be of the kind “a sad person walking”, and not, in a neutral way, “a human being making slow walking movements, with bent shoulders and tense facial muscles that point toward the ground”.

At the same time, the very construction of our sense of self is built through social contacts and interactions. What Scheler defines in *The Nature of Sympathy* as an “undifferentiated flux” (between mine and yours), implements a continuous learning and redefinition of our bodily-integrated system through repeated interactions, in which the parts involved can create a *shared terrain* of action.²⁶ *Value systems*, meaning not only moral instances but primarily basic patterns that correlate with the release of brain neurotransmitters and are guided (at least at a basic level) by evolution and evolutionary strategies, both influence and are influenced by new experiences. This can be observed in the brain-body integrated structure.

As Gerald Edelman points out, value systems are responsible for the release of an appropriate neurotransmitter that affects our perception, our reaction to and our interaction with the world. On the other hand, synaptic connections and perceptual categoriza-

tion, related to value systems and to the significance of situations and objects for the subject, are shaped and modified by new (social, perceptive,...) experiences.²⁷ For instance, we can learn things about the world through others' observation: we can discover the danger of a specific action by seeing its effect on another person, instead of experiencing it directly ourselves. The way we perceive that kind of situation from that moment on will be different, involving an expectation of harm, a pre-noetic tendency to avoid it or escape from it, and so on. Value systems are unquestionably dynamic. They are not imposed in advance, but are both responsible for and affected by the very individual history of the person, changing her neural structure and her possible interaction with the world. It is a reconfigurable dynamics of action-reaction-interpretation that presupposes an embodied subject capable of detecting meaning and consequently capable of creative responses. This represents good evidence for the phenomenological implausibility on which the distinction between inside and outside is based, since all the levels mutually influence one another with no possibility of distinguishing discrete aspects.

Would therefore our other-perception be the same without this value system? Most probably, without this very basic affective shape we would encounter a Cartesian automaton, a neutral machine equipped with movement on which we would project intentions and meaning, a *Theory Theory* to the nth degree. Now, let us imagine we are primitive people, hunting for a living and often changing settlement. With such inferential needs, we wouldn't survive in the environment long! It would take us some time to detect a predator's movements, since they would have no direct meaning (in fact, we would need time to gather and sum up the clues in order to make a prediction). So we wouldn't be able to recognize such movements as "threatening", or at least the process of collecting all the clues needed to interpret the situation would require so much time

that we would meet a sure death in the predator's jaws. On the contrary, with a value-system and the ability to catch expressivity, an immediate and adequate reaction to the contingent situation would be possible, allowing us in this case to hunt the animal or to run away as fast as possible.

It is no surprise, then, that Edelman defines values as based on evolution and, at the same time, the process of recategorization partially based on them as dynamic. A "stupid animal", with no capacity for direct meaningful perception and for learning from such perception would not survive in the environment. Even though it is not the aim of this paper to give an evolutionary account of empathy, I maintain that the perception of expressivity is very likely to emerge in response to environmental stimuli, given the fact that surviving and being in good health can be regarded as values in themselves. We could think that, thanks to such values, and even before the birth of language, social relationships were made possible. Let us imagine the life of a primitive man: perception of movement and expressivity could have at least a double pivotal role. On the one hand, the detection of danger in the environment, such as the threatening movement of a predator or the sense of disgust provoked by tasting or smelling a very bitter fruit, could teach us to elude poisoning and to learn what dangers to avoid (the "expressivity" of the fruit, meant in the Gibsonian sense of *affordance*,²⁸ can therefore change from "inviting" to "disgusting, to be avoided"). On the other hand, social relationships, which increase the possibility of survival, are made possible starting from the embodied pre-inferential layer. A good example, at the very primary level of the social dimension, is the birth of a child: it comes out of the womb crying, and it is immediately perceived as a creature needing care, also thanks to its small dimensions and round, harmless eyes. Without the ability of immediately detecting expressions as meaningful, probably a baby would simply be abandoned, since it is not able to formulate

and communicate a sentence about its needs. Again, in Gibsonian-expressive terms, its *affordance* calls us to an act of care.

My intention here is surely not to reduce the entire human dimension to an evolutionary or a merely biological basis. Rather, my purpose is to claim that the roots of the “self” and of empathy are clearly embedded in our body and in our active relationship with the world. Since every human being has a personal history which affects her values (just as values affect her perspective on this history), a proper social account must consider not only the “universal grammar of expressivity”, but also the specific and the general contexts, the unique history and experiences of the person, and her never-neutral relationship with other human beings. The personal layer partially exceeds the perceptual experience and language certainly has a fundamental role in social contacts, yet it would be surgically dualistic to abstract an invisible “mind” from the “physical” person we encounter, just as it would be impossible to experience a feeling disconnected from our body. Even if we try to hide an expression, e.g., of amusement, our heartbeats still accelerate, our face muscles still relax and it is much harder to repress a guffaw than to manifest it. Bodily expression is, in this respect, part of the emotion itself.

Given that our perception is absolutely non-neutral, an actual dynamic relationship with the world and our human fellows takes place. It is of consequence to the arguments put forward in this paper to deduce that we never “receive” social stimuli (or any other stimulus from the environment) like a silver plate etched by a jeweller. I agree with what Shaun Gallagher and Somogy Varga claim:

my perception of your action is already formed in terms of how I might respond to your action. I see your action, not as a fact that needs to be interpreted in terms of your mental states, but as a situated opportunity or affordance for my own action in response. The intentions that I can see in your movements appear to me as

logically or semantically continuous with my own, or discontinuous, in support or in opposition to my task, as encouraging or discouraging, as having potential for (further) interaction or as something I want to turn and walk away from.²⁹

Social relationships are therefore influenced by contexts, affordances, meaningful movements and actions and, last but not least, by our disposition (from moods to emotions to the influence of past experiences, for instance). The complex and “smart” character of perception remains however, at least for the basic processes of empathy, pre-reflective, allowing for rapid, embodied interactions with the world and our fellows.

What I have argued does not aim to completely eliminate the explicit dimensions of the empathic process, as an act of verbal communication or of “putting ourselves in someone else’s shoes” might be considered, but rather to point to how the roots of sociality are deeply embodied in and connected to the world around us. What is indeed not sufficiently noted in the main theories of empathy, is this flesh-and-bones character of intentions and emotions, which reveals a unitary subject with no surgical split between its *res cogitans* (mental states) and *res extensa* (physical body). I reject a transparency theory that would claim perfect knowledge of a person, but it can be easily noticed in our own everyday experience that inferences or simulations are not needed to detect the meaningfulness of actions. A reconsideration of empathy in these terms intends to go beyond the mind-reading limits of both ST and TT, by stressing the fact that expressivity and value-based perception are reliable bases from which to reveal the fallacy of an inner-outer distinction and to describe our pre-noetical, direct encounter with the other.

This non-solipsistic account comes to a close with a brief mention of the current debate about collective intentionality. Though the discussion is far too complex to be described in detail in the present article, a shared dimension

between two or more subjects could take intersubjectivity one step further.

■ From interaction to shared action: what notion of “we”?

In recent years, a differentiated and quite puzzling debate on the collective dimension has been carried on using terms like *shared actions*, *inter-agency*, *collective intentionality*, *we-intentionality*, *joint attention*, and so on.³⁰ It is not the aim of this article to list all the theories that concern the “we-dimension”, but I believe that a brief clarification is necessary in order to establish what degree of kinship, in my view, these approaches might have with the notion of empathy I have been trying to outline. When switching from perceptual interaction to collective intentionality, some perplexing questions might arise from the conceptual uncertainty about the nature of a possible “we”: does it imply a collective entity that stands above individuals and, if this possibility is excluded, how is it possible to speak in terms of “collective” or “shared” rather than merely intersubjective? Is individuality preserved in these kind of phenomena, or is there a risk of falling back into the Schelerian concepts of emotional contagion and unipathy?

When dealing with the notion of inter-agency, given that agency can be defined as «the experience of being the source and the cause of our actions»,³¹ a phenomenological contradiction seems to arise. We move inside a milieu that, although shared among a plurality of subjects, is experienced from a first-person perspective. Like the Wittgensteinian metaphor of the eye in the visual field, which necessarily entails a viewpoint that frames our vision,³² the first-person perspective represents the phenomenological *residuum* without which no experience would ever be possible. How would a sense of *shared* agency emerge, then, if the subject cannot exceed an originary first-person frame? The scenario is obviously more complex. Albert Bandura points to a triadic relation that influences a never-isolated human

agency (personal factors, actions in a context and environmental constraints).³³ From a different perspective, phenomenology can explain the same originary immersion in sociality by highlighting the basic connection between agency and intentionality. If intentionality is, in the Husserlian sense, the unavoidable being-directed-towards-something of my consciousness, this transcendental pro-property describes every creature’s condition of being immersed in a lived world and in contact with other living beings from the very beginning.

Since we share this milieu with others, it is no surprise that the first form of “we” can arise from joint attention, that is: “we are directed towards the same object or event”, and I can clearly detect it from a person’s gaze turning towards a certain direction, an expression of interest or concentration, and so on. Gallagher speaks of joint attention as a capacity that emerges from the 9th month of life and lets us learn about the world through others;³⁴ what is crucial is his use of this phenomenon as a bridge between primary and secondary intersubjectivity. The author seems indeed to waver between ascribing joint attention either to a collective layer or to interaction between subjects. Both intersubjectivity and joint attention cannot be conceived without primary interaction, yet it would be useful to give each of them its peculiar status: intersubjectivity would not be enough to justify the sense of shared agency or we-intentionality that emerges in collective dimensions. Two people, when interacting, do not necessarily share a common purpose or attention to the same thing, as we can detect in the case of empathy itself (the empathizer is paying attention to the other’s emotional expressions, whereas the other is not necessarily focused on her own feelings). Still, Gallagher is right to aim at investigating how this first form of “we” is linked to empathic perception, as this could shed some light on the degree of agents’ independence inside the collective dimension.

It would be coherent with our previous reasoning, which led to a reevaluation of expressivity and embodied interplay, to con-

ceive of a shared dimension in which interaction is based on the possibility of empathic understanding through perception, with an experienced reciprocity that emerges from it but is not reducible to the mere sum of the subjects. Though the phenomenon cannot be reduced to separated intentionalities, I would differentiate a “sense of we”, which implies the *feeling* of accomplishing a common action and of being the cause of it *together* (shared agency) or of experiencing a common emotion (collective intentionality), from the actual ontological supervenience of a collective entity. The phenomenology of subjects engaged in a collective dimension cannot envision them as absorbed in a single mind (nor in an embodied entity, for obvious reasons),³⁵ in which they would lose their personal *sense of agency*. To lose any sense of who is acting or is experiencing an emotion, while still feeling part of a “we”, would mean to fall prey to emotional contagion or unipathy.

Scheler distinguishes between four forms of social acts: the immediate co-feeling of the same emotion “with someone” (*das unmittelbare Mitfühlen “mit jemand”*); the co-feeling of “something” (*das Mitgefühl “an etwas”*), experienced with the intention of affectively perceiving suffering or joy and adequately responding (e.g. compassion for someone’s grief); emotional contagion (*Gefühlsansteckung*), an involuntary process of identification where the I-thou perception is lost with respect to an affective state and the *process* itself poses purposes that go beyond single individuals (e.g. emotional outbursts that lead to the non-responsibility for actions in mass protests); unipathy (*Einsföhlung*), an extreme case of emotional contagion, in which not only is there a fusional confusion in the subject with respect to the experience of an emotion, but also the alter-ego is identified with one’s own ego.³⁶ Scheler describes cases of emotional contagion and unipathy as normal (e.g. in erotic love) or as pathological (e.g. in schizophrenia) conditions, and as more or less transitory (e.g. hypnosis, children’s identification in plays, some instinctu-

al components in the mother-infant relationship). Some forms of unipathy are therefore quite ordinary or even necessary for development, but an extreme case with absolute loss of individuality would be able to erase the personal dimension of a human being.³⁷

Since identification tends toward an “I”, where the experienced would be felt as a first person rather than as a collectivity,³⁸ it is reasonable to infer that in unipathic dimensions any “sense of we” is annulled. To have what we may call today a collective intentionality, the sense of agency of two or more subjects should be preserved. In this sense, Scheler uses the example of shared grief as experienced by two parents in front of their child’s corpse: their feelings are actually the *same* grief, the *same* sorrow. It is no more just a matter of empathic perception, since a further dimension of *Mit-einanderfühlen* emerges with reciprocity and involvement as a “we” in a shared situation. No unipathic identification makes these subjects become an “I”, rather, while their feeling is identical, the *function* of such feeling is kept separated between mother and father. What is shared is *intentionality*, the being-directed towards the same emotion, but this neither collapses into identification nor fuses inside a single agent.

Hanne De Jaegher, Ezequiel Di Paolo and Shaun Gallagher point out rightly that collective phenomena have their own autonomy, meaning that they constitute a self-sustaining system; nevertheless, this quality of a collective system also implies that «[i]nteractions are social as long as the autonomy of the agents is not dissolved» (since if dissolved it would become a form of coercion or, as I have argued, a unipathic fusion).³⁹ This can be observed in the case of shared emotions, like the common grief discussed above, or collective actions. Searle uses the example of dancers in a ballet to explain collective actions,⁴⁰ but it is not necessary to have precise choreography for that kind of we-dimension: direct perception and bodily interaction contribute to the grounds for cooperation,⁴¹ even when dancers are meeting for the first time.

If one imagines, for instance, two salsa dancers, the situation could be described as follows: there is a more or less shared set of rules (basic steps, figures), a common field of embodied communication through interaction (perception is shaped by practice, which leads to some holds and movements being experienced as intended to guide the partner in a certain manner or direction). To perform a good dance, the two dancers should not act merely to show their individual ability: a good performance is accomplished when there is cooperation, trust and successful embodied understanding in interaction. Joint attention is directed towards rhythm, music and movements. I believe that this is a good example to show how the individual sense of agency is not lost (because a dancer always pays more or less explicit attention to her steps and gestures), but is rather inserted in a sense of inter-agency in which the two partners achieve a creative result that is not reducible to the sum of two single, detached performers.

I maintain that an interactive and value-based view of perception can lead to a better understanding of the social encounter, since it provides an adequate basis for conceiving of the collective dimension as grounded in embodied experience and interaction. As one approaches TT and ST from an experiential point of view, the fact that they underestimate expressivity and interaction either because of the need for explicit reasoning or for self-projection in simulation clearly appears to be phenomenologically implausible. How could we ever engage in a shared activity, if we had to guess each other's intentions without the possibility of verifying them through direct understanding in perception? Would the two salsa dancers achieve a good shared performance, if they always had to think explicitly about the meaning of their partner's gestures?

The idea of shared intentionality inside TT or ST would lead to inextricable impasses: self-confined subjects, a mere sum of monadological dimensions could never prove the existence of an effective shared goal, nor

would they be open to a *collective*, interconnected dimension. On the contrary, by always keeping an embodied point of view from the very beginning of empathy, I have developed a perspective that frees the subject from the solipsistic barriers of the argument from analogy in all its derivations, and gives primary importance to the richness of the interactions and learning processes that shape the human person.

Nevertheless, even in a shared phenomenon grounded on this basis, one's individual agency and first-person perspective are not lost in one unifying mind that would absorb all subjects in a new "I". As long as it avoids any form of unipathy, a current challenge for perception-based empathy is to find its proper place in the debate on shared agency and collective intentionality. In my opinion, this could help us arrive at a well-grounded explanation by providing an essential clue as to how the "we" emerges from "I-thou", with the basis of a direct *other*-encounter as a starting point.

Notes

¹ It is significant that for an infant, in Max Scheler's example, intersubjectivity in the visual perception of others precedes the recognition of its own feet: a newborn that sees his feet for the first time will have to learn the association between this optic image and his proprioception. See M. SCHELER, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die material Wertethik* (1913/16), in: M. SCHELER, *Max Schelers Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. II, hrsg. von M. FRINGS, Bouvier-Verlag, Bonn 2009, p. 402.

² It has been demonstrated, for instance, that postnatal depression in mothers directly leads to impairment in their children's capacity for emotional regulation and cognitive development, due to a disturbance in the mothers' attitude toward the infants (insensitivity, hostility or poor response to the child's attention). See L. MURRAY, P. COOPER, P. FEARON, *Parenting Difficulties and Postnatal Depression: Implications for Primary Healthcare Assessment and Intervention*, in: «Community Practitioner», vol. LXXXVII, n. 11, 2014, pp. 34-38. It is important to remark that a theory of mind is supposed to be formed around

the age of four/six (cf. the experiment by Wimmer and Perner below). Since the study by Murray et al. was carried out with children from six weeks to eighteen months, it suggests that interactions have a role in the emotional and cognitive core of the formation of a person through embodied and affective dynamics, without any need for inferential and explicit reasoning.

³ J.G. HERDER, *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele: Bemerkungen und Träume* (1778), in: J.G. HERDER, *Sämtliche Werke*, hrsg. von B. SUPHAN, Bd. VIII, Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, Berlin 1892.

⁴ R. VISCHER, *Über das optische Formgefühl. Ein Beitrag zur Ästhetik* (1872), in: R. VISCHER, *Drei Schriften zum ästhetischen Formgefühl*, Niemeyer, Halle 1927, pp. 1-44.

⁵ R. DESCARTES, *Meditationes de prima philosophia, in qua Dei existentia et animæ immortalitas demonstratur* (1641), in: R. DESCARTES, *Œuvres de Descartes*, éd. par C. ADAM, P. TANNERY, Tome VII, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, Paris 2000 (Eng. trans. *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in: R. DESCARTES, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. II, translated by J. COTTINGHAM, R. STOOHOFF, D. MURDOCH, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1984, pp. 3-63, here p. 21).

⁶ T. LIPPS, *Einführung und ästhetischer Genuß*, in: «Die Zukunft», n. 54, 1906, pp. 100-114; T. LIPPS, *Leitfaden der Psychologie*, Engelmann, Leipzig 1909, pp. 222-241.

⁷ H. WIMMER, J. PERNER, *Beliefs About Beliefs: Representation and Constraining Function of Wrong Beliefs in Young Children's Understanding of Deception*, in: «Cognition», vol. XIII, n. 1, 1983, pp. 103-128.

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 106.

⁹ A. GOLDMAN, *Simulating Minds. The Philosophy, Psychology, and Neuroscience of Mindreading*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2006, p. 23.

¹⁰ V. GALLESE, *The "Shared Manifold" Hypothesis. From Mirror Neurons To Empathy*, in: «Journal of Consciousness Studies», vol. VIII, n. 5-7, 2001, pp. 33-50, here p. 36.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² V. GALLESE, *Finding the Body in the Brain*, in: B. MCLAUGHLIN, H.K. KORNB�ITH (eds.), *Goldman and His Critics*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken (NJ) 2016, pp. 299-314, here p. 299.

¹³ Zahavi's criticism is relevant for ST, TT and the argument from analogy which are similarly committed to a view of the other having *hidden* men-

tal states, which in turn implies the need for mediation to interpret them. See D. ZAHAVI, *Expression and Empathy*, in: D. HUTTO, M. RATCLIFFE (eds.), *Folk Psychology Re-Assessed*, Springer, Dordrecht 2007, pp. 25-40, here pp. 28-29.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 27.

¹⁵ PLATO, *Ion*, 535e.

¹⁶ M. SCHELER, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* (1923), in: M. SCHELER, *Max Schelers Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. VII, hrsg. von M. FRINGS, Bouvier-Verlag, Bonn 2005⁷ (Eng. trans. *The Nature of Sympathy*, translated by P. HEACH, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1954, p. 260).

¹⁷ See D. ZAHAVI, *Beyond Empathy. Phenomenological Approaches to Intersubjectivity*, in: «Journal of Consciousness Studies», vol. VIII, n. 5-7, 2001, pp. 151-167.

¹⁸ As regards Zahavi's use of the term "empathy" and his Phenomenological Proposal, see D. ZAHAVI, *Empathy and Direct Social Perception: A Phenomenological Proposal*, in: «The Review of Philosophy and Psychology», vol. II, n. 3, 2011, pp. 541-558; D. ZAHAVI, *Self and Other. Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy and Shame*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014. For Gallagher's theory of direct perception, implied in primary intersubjectivity, see S. GALLAGHER, *Direct Perception in the Intersubjective Context*, in: «Consciousness and Cognition», vol. XVII, n. 2, 2008, pp. 535-543. A reference to Scheler can be found in both authors, see for instance S. GALLAGHER, D. ZAHAVI, *The Phenomenological Mind*, Routledge, London-New York, 2008, pp. 171-196.

¹⁹ See also D. ZAHAVI, *Expression and Empathy*, cit., p. 32.

²⁰ E. HUSSERL, *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge*, in: E. HUSSERL, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. I, hrsg. von B. STRASSER, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1950, pp. 138-141.

²¹ In addition to the well-known *Ideas II* and *Cartesian Meditations*, where Husserl stresses the importance of appresentation, it is interesting to quote two contrasting sentences from respectively the first and second part of *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität*: «[a]nders für Leibeseigenschaften des fremden Leibes und für das zum fremden Leibe gehörige und mitaufgefasste Ästesiologische und Physische» (E. HUSSERL, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität*, Erster Teil (1905-1920), in: E. HUSSERL, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. XIII, hrsg. von I. KERN, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1973, p. 47); «[e]s ist aber evident, das jedermann, der für mich

„ein Anderer“ ist, als solcher für mich erfahrbar, keine andere Welt erfahren kann als eine solche, die auch für mich erfahrbar wäre» (E. HUSSERL, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität*, Zweiter Teil (1921-1928), in: E. HUSSERL, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. XIV, hrsg. von I. KERN, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1973, p. 384). On the fluctuations of Husserl's conceptions of empathy, see D. ZAHAVI, *Self and Other*, cit., pp. 123-141.

²² E. HUSSERL, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, Zweites Buch, *Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*, in: E. HUSSERL, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. IV, hrsg. von W. BIEMEL, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1952, p. 167 (Eng. trans. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Second Book, *Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, translated by R. ROJCEWICZ, A. SCHUWER, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht/Boston/London 1989, p. 175).

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ See p. 10 in the present paper.

²⁵ See S. GALLAGHER, *Direct Perception in the Intersubjective Context*, cit.

²⁶ For a further analysis on the connection between intersubjectivity and shared agency, cf. the last section.

²⁷ See G.M. EDELMAN, *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire. On the Matter of the Mind*, Basic Books, Harper Collins Publishers, New York 1992, p. 134.

²⁸ See J.J. GIBSON, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Taylor and Francis Group, New York 1986.

²⁹ S. GALLAGHER, S. VARGA, *Social Constraints on the Direct Perception of Emotions and Intentions*, in: «Topoi», vol. XXXIII, n. 1, 2014, pp. 185-199, here pp. 189-190.

³⁰ See for instance D.P. SCHWEIKARD, H.B. SCHMID, *Collective Intentionality*, in: E.N. ZALTA (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford 2013; A.S. ROTH, *Shared Agency*, in: E.N. ZALTA (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford 2011.

³¹ See D. CRIVELLI, M. BALCONI, *Agency and Interagency, Action and Joint Action: Theoretical and Neuropsychological Evidence*, in: M. BALCONI (ed.), *Neuropsychology of the Sense of Agency. From Consciousness to Action*, Springer, Milan 2010, pp. 107-122.

³² See L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* (1921), Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2003 (Eng. transl. *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*,

translated by B. MCGUINNESS, D. PEARS, Routledge, London-New York 2001).

³³ See A. BANDURA, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs (NJ) 1986.

³⁴ S. GALLAGHER, *Joint Attention, Joint Action, and Participatory Sense Making*, in: «Alter: Revue de Phénoménologie», vol. XVIII, pp. 111-124, here p. 116.

³⁵ In the context of shared emotions, Salice correctly points out that the idea of a group-subject would imply at least two impasses, from the ontological and the phenomenological points of view. From an ontological perspective, a disembodied mind would emerge and exceed individualities, whereas a unique entity of experience would mean that all individuals engaged in a shared dimension would have first-person access to each other's feelings, beliefs, thoughts. See A. SALICE, *Shared Emotions - a Schelerian Approach*, in: «Thaumazein», n. 3, 2015.

³⁶ See M. SCHELER, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*, cit. (Eng. trans., pp. 12-36).

³⁷ See *ivi* (Eng. trans. p. 35).

³⁸ Scheler claims that in emotional contagion the feeling would be perceived as one's own, though the causal origin might be individuated in another person. M. SCHELER, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*, cit. (Eng. trans. p. 37). This is apparently a form of transmission or identification that doesn't correspond to the "sense of we" that I am trying to describe.

³⁹ H. DE JAEGHER, E. DI PAOLO, S. GALLAGHER, *Can Social Interaction Constitute Social Cognition?*, in: «Trends in Cognitive Sciences», vol. XIV, n. 10, 2010, pp. 441-447, here p. 443.

⁴⁰ See J. SEARLE, *Collective Intentions and Actions*, in: P.R. COHEN, J. MORGAN, M. POLLACK (eds.), *Intentions in Communication*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1990, pp. 401-415.

⁴¹ On the notion of cooperation, Bratman criticizes Searle for being too strong in his claim that «[t]he notion of a we-intention, of collective intentionality, implies the notion of cooperation» (M.E. BRATMAN, *Shared Cooperative Activity*, in: «The Philosophical Review», vol. CI, n. 2, 1992, pp. 327-341, here p. 406), though he refers to *mutual support* and circumstances cooperatively relevant to our J-ing. I think that Searle is right in holding a *background sense* of another as suitable for cooperation, but I claim that this is grounded in an intersubjective encounter in which nothing is more primary than my immediate perception of her as an embodied living

being and experiential subject. I therefore agree with his claim of sensing a possible agent of cooperation,

but I would define this experience as pre-noetic rather than primary.