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STUDI

From Empathy to Empathies. Towards a Paradigm Change

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Abstract Today's debate on empathy is characterized by an interplay between neuroscience, philosophy of mind and phenomenology that has led to several distinct definitions of empathy (enlarged, restricted, minimalist). Much of the difficulty in defining empathy is due to the emphasis on its prosocial value, a feature that has made it a "keyword" of our time. Does the role empathy has been assigned in social interactions imply its involvement in matters of identity, similarity and affective resonance? What happens when the flow of sensations and emotions between humans produces more complex interactions and gives rise to feelings of estrangement, facing the unknown, or a fear of others? We need a paradigm shift in which we consider empathy in practice, rather than theory. We need to consider how various empathies arise in different contexts and manifest in diverse ways. In this way, we can shed light on the limits and failures of mutual comprehension, and arrive at a more radical and realistic vision of the great challenge involved in relating to others.
KEYWORDS: Empathy; Phenomenological Approach; Intersubjectivity; Neuroscience; Otherness

Riassunto *Dall'empatia alle empatie. Verso un mutamento di paradigma* – Il dibattito attuale sull'empatia è caratterizzato dall'intersezione tra neuroscienze, filosofia della mente e fenomenologia e sono state proposte diverse definizioni dell'empatia (allargata, ristretta, minimalista). Molte delle difficoltà nel definire l'empatia derivano dalla priorità attribuita al suo valore prosociale, l'aspetto che ne ha fatto una parola chiave del nostro tempo. Per esplicare il ruolo che le viene assegnato nelle interazioni sociali, l'empatia deve implicare identità, somiglianza e corrispondenza affettiva? Che cosa accade quando il flusso di sensazioni e di emozioni tra esseri umani genera movimenti più complessi, in cui emergono l'estraneità, l'ignoto, la paura dell'altro? È necessario un cambiamento di paradigma e considerare l'empatia non in teoria, ma in pratica. E guardare alle empatie, i cui contesti e differenti manifestazioni mettono in luce limiti e fallimenti della comprensione reciproca, guadagnando una visione più radicale e realistica della grande sfida che caratterizza le nostre relazioni con gli altri.
PAROLE CHIAVE: Empatia; Approccio fenomenologico; Intersoggettività; Neuroscienze; Alterità

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What is empathy?

EMPATHY, AS EDITH STEIN CLEARLY noted in the title of her 1917 book,[1] is a problem, and this is still true today despite profound changes in our scientific and philosophical understanding. One cannot deny that empathy has relational and social significance, but to this day its role in individual and collective life remains unclear. Studies in which cognitive and non-cognitive abilities enable us to *mind reading* have raised the question as to whether mind reading is identical to empathy or whether it has its own unique qualities.[2]

The debate triggered by this question has produced a great number of contributions, but the time to re-launch research has come: this implies overcoming stereotypes and rhetoric, and identifying empathy as an instinctive shared feeling that directly connects individuals to groups, humanity, nature and allows for *mind-reading*, access others' minds (which has proven to be difficult, just as it is obviously dangerous if used to manipulate or control). It is a true challenge, especially nowadays since empathy, as recent experimental data suggest, has become a unique research field of its own, in which scientific and philosophical perspectives are not meant to be unified in the name of a simplistic idea of synthesis, but should both seize the opportunity to be conceptually renewed.

Today's debate centres on the neurosciences, philosophy of mind and phenomenology and the exchanges between them. Recent research on empathy is especially aware of its manifold profiles, and many crucial differences related to reflections on mirror systems, simulations, emotions and shared representations have emerged in the study of what is currently called empathy. Such differences are however often juxtaposed, and the lines between each field and the next become blurred. The core of this debate is to explore internal differences in what we consider empathy to be; it is only by exploring these that we can take new scientific and philosophical perspectives enabling both research fields to reach their potential.

"What is empathy?" is the compulsory question that sets in motion many studies and articles on empathy. The term has a variety of meanings, and there is little consensus on its actual definition,[3] with accurate and articulate notions found side by side with generic and broader ones. Daniel Batson identifies eight distinct yet connected "things", or phenomena called empathy. Batson works on empathy-altruism relations and believes that this plurality of definitions results from researchers trying to answer two different questions at once: «how can we know others' feelings and thoughts?» and «how can we respond to others' suffering with sensitiveness and care?».[4] Answering the former would require a specific kind of "knowledge": "recognising" others; answering the latter would require a specific kind of action: seeking to help others with their needs. Opinions on the role of shared affection, caring about others' well-being, comprehension and imagination, and the relationship between empathy and social cognition accordingly differ.

"Enlarged" empathy

A vague and confused definition of empathy would turn it into an umbrella term, covering a number of different experiences. Stephanie Preston and Frans de Waal recently stated that it would be possible to unite empirical data from each field, from neurosciences to psychology – using a method based on the "perception-action" model. Empathy would include "all processes that emerge from the fact that observers understand others' states by activating their own personal, neural, and mental representations of that state". Empathy is therefore defined as "emotional and mental sensitivity to another's state, from being affected by and sharing in this state to assessing the reasons for it and adopting the other's point of view".[5] Primatologist Frans de Waal, synthesising his own research, suggested a model analogous to a matryoska doll, representing the linear development of empathic

behaviour from the animal to the human. In his view the "cosmopolitan ape" has a basic sympathetic, associative and cooperative core (mirroring processes, bodily synchronisation, imitation, emotional contagion), which then becomes more stratified in humans, requiring more sophisticated abilities, such as changes in perspective and caring about others' wellbeing. This is how the complexity of empathy is naturalistically reduced, making way for a broad and generic definition that also includes its negative aspects.[6]

The difference in psychic and behavioural phenomena related to empathy – all of which vary in relation to functions, biological processes and effects – is acknowledged in a more articulated way by those who suggest a "broader" notion of empathy, in which affective sharing, attribution of feelings and mental states, association and cooperation, whilst being present, play a different role.[7]

In distinguishing mirroring and mentalizing empathic processes, Alvin Goodman believes that the latter, overlapping with mind reading, are an extended form of empathy, in which the «term's emotional and "caring" connotation», corresponding to forms of affective empathy, is bracketed.[8] Goldman's position reflects the encounter with the neurosciences – especially the discovery of mirror systems – and the ToM simulationist variant, which have played a vital role in recent research on empathy. The ability to attribute mental states to others is no longer based on inferring procedures, but on an "immediate resonance", which allows us to fully understand a bodily movement or a facial expression signifying fear, rage, or disgust via an "embodied simulation" (or automatic internal simulation). Other imaginative and re-enactive conscious activities are added to this first mechanism.[9]

Reinterpreting the simulationist variant of the "Theory of Mind" in light of empathy[10] causes a deep shift in perspective: once the *recognition* of others' intentions, emotions and sensations produces an *understanding* of their meaning, bodily interdependence directly becomes intersubjectivity. Empathy and social cognition therefore overlap, and empathy's different perceptive-emotional, cognitive and practical-moral components maintain an extrinsic relationship. In this light, empathy is not different from our daily encounters with others and can be identified with the original relational character of the human condition.

Is there then nothing "special" about empathy? Is empathy a sort of unconscious sociality based on an original bodily interdependence that allows for a level of understanding necessary to live our daily lives? Is empathy simply the transmission and circulation of sensations and lived emotions from one subject to another?

"Restricted" empathy

A number of scholars have attempted to answer these questions by suggesting more exacting definitions, refusing to identify empathy with *mind reading* and aiming to discover what is "special" about empathy and distinguishes it from sympathy and contagion. It should be noted that these approaches also involve affective matching, considered to be a key component or a consequence of empathy, and the "as if" of simulation. This might remind us of Frédérique de Vignemont and Pierre Jacob, who listed five conditions that define empathy: The empathiser and his target must experience a similar feeling, a product of the perception or imagination of the latter's situation by the former, accompanied by the awareness that a "cause-effect" connection between the two feelings exists. Empathy is finally completed by attending to others' wellbeing.[11] Amy Coplan reached similar conclusions: she strongly urged for a restricted definition of empathy, but gave one that has an affective and a cognitive component whilst excluding contagion and identification:

> Empathy is a complex imaginative procedure in which an observer simulates another's psychic states whilst maintaining a firm distinction between himself and the other.[12]

These examples show how difficult it is to ignore a number of aspects pertaining to what is commonly considered to be empathy, even by including recent developments in experimental research and contrasting affective identification with the necessity of distinguishing between self and other. Unlike what is commonly thought, the neurosciences have not simplified the problem of empathy, but on the contrary, have made it more complex. Data pertaining to mirroring processes make it impossible to ignore the role of bodily interdependence and the neurobiological mechanisms of affective matching and motor imitation. It is therefore necessary to investigate the localisation of this type of vicarious response in the empathic experience. Does this element simply "trigger" empathy processes or is it one of its key components? The different answers given by scholars attest to the complexity of the issue.

Frédérique de Vignemont and Pierre Jacob observed that the pain inflicted by a needlesting can trigger a similar physical sensation of anxiety in the observer, accompanied by a muscular contraction related to the localisation, duration, and intensity of the stimulus. This is a contagion effect, which often causes subjects to focus on themselves and not on the other. But empathic responses to others' pain do not always require the direct reproduction of a painful stimulus on our own skin, nor a mental image of what is happening to others. Understanding that another is in pain depends on an affective response that is different from experiencing pain or another form of suffering in the first person. Some experiments suggest this could be part of a bodily "feeling" which triggers less common and more contextual aspects of pain, such as its unpleasantness.[13]

In light of questions arising from experimental studies, empathy appears to be a complicated experience, in need of mediations, some of which diminish the role of the immediate and involuntary affective response between individuals. The studies on pain-empathy mentioned above (which aim to understand how the "I feel your pain" experience works) end up overturning the relation between empathy and compassion. When we try to define the specific quality of an empathic experience, phenomena such as empathic distress and negative feelings concerning this empathic condition (depression, refusal to help others) emerge. Motivation to take care of others therefore becomes problematic, and we cannot avoid making a distinction between empathy ("feeling with") and compassion ("feeling for", which is characterized by positive feelings aiming to relieve others' unease) if we wish to maintain affective sharing as one of empathy's key components.[14] This distinction has been embraced, not accidentally, by those who, like Paul Bloom, are "against empathy" and in favour of "rational compassion".[15]

Several definitions of empathy (by no means an academic issue alone) disclose the most interesting aspect of this debate: it seems clear that difficulties in defining empathy derive from the priority assigned to affirming or denying its prosocial value, the aspect that has made it a key-word in our time.

Must the definition of empathy encompass identity, similarity and affective correspondence if we want to fully understand its role in human relations? Is the mirror analogy appropriate, or does empathy merit deeper research as to what happens when the mirror breaks, and the flux of sensations and emotions between humans makes way for more complex transformations, in which estrangement, the unknown, difficulty and fear of reaching others actively take part? Should we be more deeply moved by others' misery and suffering, or should we recognise others and the value of their experiences as human beings?

What empathy is not: The phenomenological perspective

Minimalist empathy

Current positions in philosophy of mind and the cognitive sciences have focused on significant moments in the history of empa-

thy, specifically referring to Theodor Lipps's thought and to the phenomenological perspective. Edith Stein[16] and Max Scheler[17] engaged in a critical debate on Lipp's theories in the first twenty years of the 20th century, radically renewing the philosophical approach to empathy. Phenomenological theories have recently returned to the foreground providing many alternatives to contemporary debates.

Among the great philosophical currents of the 20th century, phenomenology was especially vital in terms of a new openness to the neurosciences; its "naturalization"[18] was a matter of discussion during the Nineties. Thereafter, scholars wondered whether interpreting mirror systems and their role in understanding others could be considered the corroboration of various phenomenological hypotheses on intersubjectivity.[19]

The philosopher Dan Zahavi, the neuroscientist Shaun Gallagher and several other researchers[20] have recently endeavored to rediscover the phenomenological perspective. Dan Zahavi, in particular, has critically discussed embodied simulation theory and other main stream approaches to empathy, following Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler and Edith Stein. He has reached the conclusion that a "minimalist" approach to empathy should be encouraged.[21]

Ruling out the need to reach a definition, Zahavi has pursued a phenomenological perspective believing this would provide a rigorous theoretical framework that takes both experimental data and aspects of current concepts of social cognition into account. We are in front of an ambitious attempt to bring analytic and continental philosophy together, which requires a complex operation: on the one hand, Zahavi deconstructs affective, cognitive and ethical-practical components that are found in commonly held notions of empathy. Aided by phenomenology, on the other hand, he reinterprets affective resonance, confirmed by experimental data, translating it with reference to embodiment as the main feature in the interaction with others' sensations, emotions, and intentions.

Zahavi's version of empathy refers to experience, and not to experimental conditions and abstract theoretical models that have little or no contact with real life. Empathy is not a feeling, but it is a perceptive intentional act of an *I* that, in making contact with the world, does not only interact with objects like mountains and cars, but also with other individuals and their physical, psychic and mental unity.[22] Empathy for Zahavi is a kind of «knowledge by acquaintance», that Husserl called «immediate experience of others».[23] Others are identified as others, and empathy cannot therefore be confused with contagion, sympathy or compassion, but it is required by all of these. That the bodily interactions and the perception of others as embodied minds has "cognitive" potential has been confirmed by recent experimental data.

There is, however, an important difference. Having immediate experience of others does not simply mean acknowledging the original relationality among humans, but is the revelation of the other's *I* as different and not belonging to our own experience; therefore, no attribution of emotion, thoughts, or wishes derives from it. Imitation, projection, internal reproduction or simulation of others' psychic states (along with analogic inference from our own experience to others' behaviour) are even less necessary to understand that others are living an emotion, or to perform an action with a goal. Empathy primarily puts us in the presence of different acting and thinking subjects who inhabit the same world. The empathiser therefore is not compelled to use his own mental repertoire to understand others. Empathy *per se* does not make it possible to understand the specific content of others' experiences, and does not produce a prosocial motivation to act in the interests of or care for others' wellbeing.

According to Dan Zahavi empathy is a form of «fundamental sensitivity towards animacy, agency, and emotional expressivity».[24] Its primary focus is not what we have in common with others, but how we experience the existence of others who are different

from us. "Minimalist" empathy therefore differs greatly from current positions in contemporary debates, and its significance is mainly negative, since it focuses on what empathy *is not*.

(1). Empathy *is not sharing* identical or similar feelings, and does not require this component as a precondition. Intentions, thoughts, and volitions can also be empathised with. Data pertaining to subpersonal motor-imitation and neuronal resonance mechanisms are not part of this approach to empathy, but are included in different phenomena, such as contagion and affective identification.

(2). Empathy *is not intersubjectivity*. Interaction and interdependence between two subjects are at the basis of the human condition, which takes form in relationship with others. Besides empathy, intersubjectivity therefore requires other kinds of relations: not only *vis-à-vis*, but also *in absentia* or via cultural and artistic products, not only in dual forms (you and I), but also collectively (we).

(3). Empathy *is not mind reading*, which is "reading" others' minds as if behavioural or bodily signatures were similar to written characters (through which readers retrace the meaning these signatures express). Perceiving others not only involves a physical perception as *res extensa*, through which one can infer the *res cogitans*, the invisible mental states. Others appear as a mind-body unity, comprehending unknowns and inaccessible elements.

(4). Empathy *is not the origin of morality* intended as an ethics of caring.

The complexity of empathy

One might wonder how the minimalist theory deals with the complexity of empathy. Deconstructing and removing from empathy what it is not could essentially highlight its limitations, especially regarding its role in social life and morality.

In order to clarify this point, it would be useful to reconstruct the greater theoretical picture in which Zahavi has placed his critical dialogue with the main actors in today's debate. As we have seen, he starts from rediscovering the originality of phenomenological thought on empathy; he unifies Husserl's, Scheler's and Stein's contributions by observing their development in other thinkers' thoughts, especially in Maurice Merleau-Ponty.[25] This approach gives little importance to elements which contrast greatly across phenomenologists, and overlooks perplexities that brought them to abandon reflections on empathy and to concentrate on different fields of research.

As we have seen, Zahavi's starting point is the phenomenological thesis, according to which the existence of other sentient, acting and thinking beings is not a theoretical question but a "given fact" that belongs to everybody's experience of reality. He radicalizes this phenomenological thesis putting the accent on the immediate intuitive form of perceiving others.[26] Empathy is therefore primarily an actual encounter, a direct, face to face contact between two individuals corresponding to daily experience where, through gestures, posture, tone of voice, we gain immediate access to the effective singularity of others, and not to a "doppelgänger". Human beings outside the *I* are part of reality as much as trees and cathedrals, but their lives, emotions, and thoughts exist within them, and are not progressively perceived as physical qualities like strata of psychic life. What is this kind of direct and immediate perception of others' physical and psychic existence, then? To answer this question, Zahavi refers to Max Scheler, the phenomenologist who most accurately defined the experience of other subjects as a form of perception.[27]

According to Scheler, perception of others is based on the ability to detect their mental

states directly within their expressive manifestations, and not through them. In physical encounters it is not only a body or a mind confronting another, but "possible expressive unities" and "possible actions unities".[28] Laughter, handshakes, hugs are more than the effect of subjective states, they make the latter manifest to others and bring them to fulfilment. A repressed or blocked state, not "culminating" in expression, loses intensity even for the person experiencing it in the first person.[29]

The thesis of the direct perception of others requires a deeper analysis: Scheler thought that expressive phenomena did not reveal others' transparency, but that there was a horizon of hidden intimacy that could not be expressed.[30] What does the immediate encounter allow us to "know" and how reliable is it, if it does not concern "knowing everything" about others and their gestures, movements and facial expressions? A number of elements from Husserl's tormented reflections on empathy and Edith Stein's early work[31] put in the context of developments in Merleau-Ponty's thought[32] now enter Zahavi's greater picture: it is now possible to reconstruct the immediacy of others' experience by conceiving of perception as a movement of active world-exploration on the part of interacting subjects, each starting from their own perspective.

Zahavi especially focuses on Husserl's in-depth analysis of genetic dynamics concerning direct and immediate identification of others and the bodily involvement in empathy. In the fifth *Cartesianische Meditationen* Husserl had introduced the idea of *Paarung* ("coupling"), believing that the expressive and relational potential of gestures, facial expressions, movements and posture indicates direct and immediate communication among individuals. Yet, this "passive" (unconscious and involuntary) characterization (of coupling) did not mean it was reduced to the subpersonal level of automatic physiological procedures. In a moving body that intersects, obstructs and overlaps its perspective and its intentions with those of another body, there is an inherent pre-reflective awareness that the other is living *something* and has experiences of his own.[33]

This is a crucial point: to fully comprehend another person, the dynamics of being a living body (*Leib*) interfacing with the self, the others and the world is more important than simply sharing an emotion. More especially, it allows us to exclude a notion of empathy as an individual mental or affective state, in order to insist on its nature as a phenomenon that depends on the relations between two subjects and their specific contents. The self and the other coexist in a common world, and their bodies have various degrees of similarity and difference which are not pre-given, but emerge in the dynamic relation of their bodily interdependence and through their sharing the same perceptive field.

The phenomenological conception of a living body that moves around the world and meets other beings, and in doing so produces and shares meanings, suggests a new vision of "sharing" others' lives. Reciprocity and collaboration stem from the movements of bodies that are not merely spectators of each others' behaviour, but interact and are mutually involved, both emotionally and sensory. An analogous shift in perspective relates to "comprehension": we know that emotions have an intentional character, because they are the experience of an event, a threat, a behaviour belonging to the outside world. Understanding why another is angry is not *being* angry, but focusing on his world-perspective, on his suffered injustice, tuning to his response to the resources the world has offered him, maybe seeing a future possibility for action for ourselves in that same response.

Zahavi's work on a unified phenomenological background follows le *fil rouge* of the elements that define empathy in his perspective: experiential "knowledge" of others, embodiment as lived interaction and sharing with the world. Empathy, however, has other profiles, that are sometimes accomplished through direct, physical perception, but sometimes do not require it. An encounter with another can result

in a reciprocal "you and I" relation, as in conversation and in doing something together, such as watching a film or dancing. In other cases, it can be an asymmetrical experience. In daily life it is also possible that we are uninterested in someone we meet and in his experiences, and we stop at the notion of "someone" smiling happily, lost in their own thoughts, walking quickly or embodying a specific sociocultural type. Unlike manifold forms of group interaction, communitarian forms of life *et similia*, "social acts" such as promises and forgiveness only come into being via relations between individuals.[34] After identifying the other as an experiencing subject (especially when meeting him in person something does not work), various cognitive activities such as theoretical inference and imaginative simulations become necessary: these separate mind and body, intention and gesture, emotion and expression, deal with intersubjective and cultural context, and attempt to give an answer to the why and how of a given situation.

Zahavi acknowledges that empathy is a stratified experience, interpersonally and socially, and that eventually it can articulate with mind reading activities and contextual elements. Admitting this, however, requires the idea that its primary quality ("experiential knowledge") provides, as Husserl would have said, «an intuitive fulfilment, a confirmation or satisfaction towards more indirect or signitive ways of the comprehension or the judgement on the mental lives of others».[35] The physical encounter, the essential element in empathy, does not exclude the possibility of empathising with a group (a grieving family), with absent people (a population that has suffered an environmental catastrophe), or with a fictitious character from a novel. In Zahavi's perspective, these are however derived forms, since they delete the distinction between the self and the other, and therefore the distinction between empathy, sympathy, and compassion, as well as the distinction between empathy as direct contact based on perception and activities based on imagination.[36]

We can conclude that Zahavi deals with the complexity of empathy by giving the phenomenological approach to empathy a key role, as a form of «fundamental sensitivity to animacy, agency and emotional expressivity».[37] How should we interpret this statement? Is empathy a basic capacity to evaluate the authenticity or inauthenticity of multiple forms of intersubjective relations? Does the direct perception of others function by "putting oneself in somebody else's shoes", through sympathy and compassion, as a "detector" for modulations in the intensity of our sharing or caring for others, or for the refusal of interest in others? We can wonder whether a "minimalist" perspective, aiming to maintain a connection with philosophy of the mind, the cognitive sciences and a wide spectrum of disciplines which deal with empathy, ultimately sets itself the goals of playing an important role in theoretical clarification. If not, could it be urging us to go "beyond empathy", as Zahavi's first essay on empathy was entitled?[38]

Empathy as a laboratory for experiences

The re-emergence of the phenomenological heritage on empathy should be considered in light of the fact that it does not offer any kind of complete theory; instead, it is a intermittent path that intertwines with other paths, even in the generations after those of Husserl and Scheler.[39] We should remember that phenomenological studies and debates took place around the time of the First World War and in its immediate aftermath: they bear traces of a period shaken by strong social and political upheavals, which led to an ethical and intellectual fervor, eventually giving birth to the "revolution" of thought that distinguished the main philosophical currents of the 20th century.[40] From this point of view, the epochal passage we are living in has similarly compelling characteristics, and urges us not to consider the phenomenological perspective on empathy as just as another theory, but as a laboratory that has extended in many directions.

The contemporary political debate on

empathy has raised crucial points, such as "humanitarian" wars, migrations, and the impact of new technology on individual and social life. Though confused and excessive, this powerful "empathy effect" reminds us of the conflicts and contradictions of the global world. Questions that arise around empathy (interpersonal communication, social and political forms of relationship, coexisting practices) cannot be fully confronted in a theoretical debate – even if philosophy of mind and of cognitive sciences exactly represent the role of science in social life today.

The evolution of phenomenology shows that a radicalisation is necessary. The "problem" of empathy is very different nowadays than it was in Edith Stein's time, starting with the roles played by social interaction, permanent telematic connection, and the global horizon for knowledge and information exchange in contemporary life. In this new picture, this "problem" should be radicalised by grasping the ethical quality of the question, which emerged in the early Twenties. Since it confronts others' otherness, empathy raises the question of intersubjectivity. From this perspective, it is perfectly clear that post-phenomenological thought has made the prioritization of others an original datum that has thrown the subject off its pedestal, making empathy useless.[41] Though a potent confutation of its rhetorical version centred on the self, this did not however answer questions that the empathic act often cruelly raises. What kind of responsibility comes from not being indifferent to others' pain? What kind of freedom should others, whom I have identified as acting subjects in the world around me, enjoy?

In contemporary debates, efforts to reach a definition revolve around the question of empathy's role in social life: does it subsume within itself qualities that Darwin attributed to it (thinking of evolutionary advantages for the weaker and younger, cooperation, and association), or is it an exceptional quality of daily life to which we turn when we are interested in another to the point that we wish to discover what he is thinking and feeling? In contemporary debates the ethical-political value of empathy is often the key criterion in every conceptualisation. Empathy, however defined, can manage (or fail) to broaden the self's references through both affective sharing and putting the self in others' shoes.

Ultimately, it is difficult to attribute the task of bearing the complexity of intersubjective relations, their dependency on social and cultural context, and judgement, and their placement in institutional, juridical and economic structures to a unique function focalised on mental procedures pertaining to the person who is empathising (and therefore has a *skill*). We must therefore ask whether it is sufficient to refer to how individuals represent others or "reflect" them by observing their behaviour (in other words, by using their own lives as a model for others' – via an "as if"), in order to explain manifold forms of interaction and communication.

It follows that it is necessary to venture beyond definitions and options in favour or against empathy to follow developments of empathic experience and the changes that it can undergo in different scenes and contexts of intersubjective relations. In other words, it is necessary to abandon the idea of an ability subsuming in itself a variety of components, and to pay attention to the multiple living, emotional, and cognitive experiences that result when the empathic act allows us to understand that we are in presence of someone whose view of the world is "his", and not "ours".

The question "What is empathy?" must therefore be reformulated in light of these new questions. How can we explain that we are always in contact with others and there are many wicked and even negative forms in which we tune into their requests or live enmities and estrangement? What happens on the level of vital movements, emotions, cognitive activities, decisions in actions, when the empathic act offers identification of another as an autonomous centre of agency in the world?

These questions require a new research horizon, which should consider *empathy not theoretically, but practically*. It is necessary to

look to historical cultural and social situations in which tuning into others' differences is difficult or rejected. Cases in which empathy meets subjective or objective obstacles are very useful for understanding its architecture, which is not composed of emotions and prosocial behaviour only. Empathy can be celebrated as a natural human ability, but in concrete interactive situations it appears to be an answer that follows different and often unpredictable paths. There are many ways of stimulating it, blocking it, holding it back, using it selectively for one's own group, or for manipulation. Attention to social context and cultural diversity is not however the only thing in question, there may also be a sequence of positive and negative experiences that arise from encounters with others.

Empathy is placed out of people's heads and is not equivalent to a magical bridge connecting two inaccessible interiorities, but is the acknowledgement of the irreducible perspective of others and of the interactions and communications that can (or cannot) stem from it. In real life, we do not only see an action or a face, but we follow them, imagine them, anticipate them; we accept or refuse the emotion or the intention they show. We do not always respond to others' feelings with that same feeling: others' joy or pain can leave us cold because we have no reason to be concerned about them, and we deliberately wish to ignore them, or because social and cultural stereotypes prevail over what we see. We must not therefore look for an *idealised empathy*, but for *empathies*, whose contexts and different manifestations bring out rejections, limits, paradoxes, difficulties and failures, all of which give us a more realistic and radical view of the great bet characterising our relations with others.

Empathy is not an observing and sharing ability, eventually an ability to classify feelings, needs, or others' intentions, which can lead us to "do" something (altruistic and caring behaviour). Identifying a depressed patient's emotion and executing codified "empathic" gestures ("I know how you feel"), or subtly interpreting their interior life by adopting psychological or sociological stereotypes, is not enough.[42] Empathy displays the fundamental dimensions of the relation between the *I* and reality: perception, consonance and dissonance in bodily encounters, the sometimes contradictory dynamics of emotions that surprise us, and at the same time are an answer to the threats and requests coming from the outside world, the possibility of seeing oneself as another. Seen in this light, empathy does not automatically lead to an "understanding" based on hypotheses, conjectures or forecasts, nor to cooperation or altruistic behaviour. *It does remind us that the only way to "know" ourselves and others is by committing to the world as beings who move, act, and suffer in time, discovering profiles and meanings of reality that depend on the others' existence.*

Empathy does not come "before", and is not a condition for the possibility (or authenticity) of different forms of cooperation, association, and participation in others' destinies. It does explain the transformative effect of our relations with reality every time another existence creates new experiences and meanings – not simply duties, contracts, debts and credits. The empathic act, from this realistic perspective, encompasses potential, limits, and risks – in short, a variety of sliding doors. Errors, inaccuracies, projections of ourselves onto others, and fear of the other are certainly problems related to the different ways in which we reach "knowledge" of others' mental states. Their correction is not however an individual performance, which can be trained or taught with specific techniques. Seeing, feeling that another's expression of interest betrays flattery or hypocrisy, and attempting to detect the reasons behind it, are not perceptive or cognitive tasks, but concrete situations in which relations with others are vigorously tested. Empathy triggers a generative dynamic in which time plays an important role. Context, concrete situations, a different focus on a relationship often mark this point in terms of *disparity and asymmetry of power, knowledge and emotional involvement*. Starting from here, we can see how sensitivity, emotions, and cognitive activities are intertwined, transform

themselves and mark the unpredictable outcomes of every encounter with others.

Notes

[1] E. STEIN, *Zum Problem der Einfühlung*, (1917), in: E. STEIN, *Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. V, Herder Verlag, Wien/Leipzig 2010.

[2] For further reading, see L. BOELLA, *Empatie. L'esperienza empatica nella società del conflitto*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2018.

[3] See J. MICHEL, *Towards a Consensus about the Role of Empathy in Interpersonal Understanding*, in: «Topoi», vol. XXXIII, n. 1, 2014, pp. 157-172. This contribution offers a critical review of the main conceptualisations of empathy. The author believes that empathy can reach its goal for social comprehension even without a precise definition of its components.

[4] C.D. BATSON, *These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena*, in: J. DECETY, W. ICKES (eds.), *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2009, pp. 3-15.

[5] F.B.M. DE WAAL, S.D. PRESTON, *Mammalian Empathy: Behavioral Manifestations and Neural Basis*, in: «Nature Reviews. Neuroscience», vol. XVIII, n. 8, 2017, pp. 498-509, here p. 498.

[6] See F.B.M. DE WAAL, *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society*, Three River Press 2009; F.B.M. DE WAAL, *The Cosmopolitan Ape: Empathy, Morality, Community, Culture – Apes Can Have it All!*, in: «Nautilus», vol. I, 2013, pp. 46-57, here p. 50 (interview by S. Paulson).

[7] 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. 43, uses the term "enlarged empathy" to describe comprehension of others' actions, emotions, and sensations on the basis of automatic and unconscious processes of embodied simulation.

[8] A.I. GOLDMANN, *Simulating Minds: The Philosophy, Psychology and Neuroscience of Mindreading,* Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, p. 4.

[9] *Ibidem,* p. 40, p. 43, p. 128 and p. 132. See C. CATMUR, *Understanding Intentions from Actions: Direct Perception, Inference, and the Role of Mirror and Mentalizing Systems*, in: «Consciousness and Cognition», vol. XXXVI, 2015, pp. 426-433.

[10] K.R. STUEBER, *Rediscovering Empathy: Agency, Folk, Psychology and the Human Sciences*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2006, p. 21, asserts that today's simulationists are the equivalent of empathy theorists (especially Theodor Lipps) in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century.

[11] See F. DE VIGNEMONT, P. JACOB, *What is like to Feel Another's Pain?*, in: «Philosophy of Science», vol. LXXIX, n. 2, 2012, pp. 295-316.

[12] A. COPLAN, *Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects*, in: A. COPLAN, P. GOLDIE (eds.), *Empathy. Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives,* Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, pp. 3-18, here p. 5.

[13] See F. DE VIGNEMONT, P. JACOB, *What is it like to Feel Another's Pain?*, cit. . The authors refer to the study of T. SINGER, B. SEYMOUR, J. O'DOHERTY, H. KAUBE, R.J. DOLAN, C.D. FRITH, *Empathy for Pain Involves the Affective but not the Sensory Components of Pain*, in: «Science», vol. CCCIII, n. 5661, 2004, pp. 1157-1162, whose results were discussed by considering results obtained using another modality (TMS instead of fMRI), in A. AVENANTI, D. BUETI, G. GALATI, S.M. AGLIOTI, *Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation Highlights the Sensorymotor Side of Empathy for Pain*, in: «Neuroscience», vol. VIII, n. 7, 2005, pp. 955-960. See also P. JACOB, *Empathy and the Disunity of Vicarious Experiences*, in: «Rivista internazionale di Filosofia e Psicologia», vol. VI, n. 1, 2015, pp. 4-23. J. ZAKI, T.D. WAKER, T. SINGER, C. KEYSERS, V. GAZZOLA, *The Anatomy of Suffering: Understanding the Relationship between Nociceptive and Empathic Pain*, in: «Trends in Cognitive Sciences», vol. XX, n. 4, 2016, pp. 249-259, investigates the neurophysiological and psychological nature of pain.

[14] See T. SINGER, O.M. KLIMECKI, *Empathy and Compassion*, in: «Current Biology», vol. XXIV, n. 18, 2014, pp. 875-878.

[15] See P. BLOOM, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion,* Vintage, New York 2017.

[16] See E. STEIN, *Zum Problem der Einfühlung*, cit.

[17] See M. SCHELER, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* (1923), in: M. SCHELER, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. VII, hrsg. von M.S. FRINGS, Franke Verlag, Bern/München 1973, pp. 7-258.

[18] See J. PETITOT, F, VARELA, B. PACHOUD. J. ROY (eds.), *Naturalizing Phenomenology*, Standford University Press, Standford 1999; M. RATCLIFFE, *Phenomenology, Neuroscience and Intersubjectivity*, in: H.L. DREYFUS, M.A. WRATHALL (eds.), *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, Blackwell, Oxford 2006, pp. 329-345; S. GAL-

LAGHER, D. ZAHAVI, *The Phenomenological Mind*, Routledge, London/New York 2008.

[19] See J.L. PETIT, *Constitution by Movement: Husserl in the Light of Recent Neurobiological Findings*, in: J. PETITOT, F, VARELA, B. PACHOUD. J. ROY (eds.), *Naturalizing Phenomenology*, cit., pp. 220-244; E. THOMPSON, *Empathy and Consciousness*, in: «Journal of Consciousness Studies», vol. VIII, n. 5-7, 2001 pp. 1-32; D. LOHMAR, Mirror Neurons and the Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity, in: «Phenomenology and Cognitive Sciences», vol. V, n. 1, 2006, pp. 5-16.

[20] Dan Zahavi has actively participated in the debate of philosophy of the mind and cognitive sciences, taking positions on current theses. The results of his critical discussion were collected and included in a unitary theoretical frame (see D. ZAHAVI, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy and Shame*, Oxford University Press 2014). See also D. ZAHAVI, J. MICHAEL, *Beyond Mirroring: 4e Perspectives on Empathy*, in: A. NEWEN, L. DE BRUIN, S. GALLAGHER (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of 4e Cognition*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York 2016. For papers by scholars who work with Zahavi, see S. GALLAGHER, *How the Body Shapes The Mind*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005; S. GALLAGHER, *Empathy, Simulation, and Narrative*", in: «Science in Context, vol. XXV, n. 3, 2012, pp. 355-381; S. OVERGAARD, *Wittgenstein and Other Minds: Rethinking Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity with Wittgenstein, Levinas, and Husserl*, Routledge, London 2007; T. FUCHS, H. DE JAEGHER, *Enactive Intersubjectivity: Participatory Sense-Making and Mutual Incorporation*, in: «Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences», vol. VIII, n. 4, 2009, pp. 465-486.

[21] D. ZAHAVI, PH. ROCHAT, *Empathy # Sharing: Perspectives from Phenomenology and Developmental Psychology*, in: «Consciousness and Cognition», vol. XXXVI, 2015, pp. 543-553. In other essays Zahavi uses the adjective "lean".

[22] D. ZAHAVI, *Self and Other*, cit., pp. 3-98. The first part of the book explores the argument of an "experiential I", whose "my" experiential feature is perceived in an intersubjective frame, but is not mediated by social experience. It is an immediate contact with our own existence, a basic access to our lived experience without which we would have no experience.

[23] *Ivi,* pp. 151-152. See E. HUSSERL, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologische Philosophie*, Bd. II, *Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution* (1912), in: E. HUSSERL, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. IV, hrsg. von W. BIEMEL, Martinus Njihoff, The Hague 1952.

[24] *Ivi*, p. 170.

[25] See *ivi*, pp. 141-146, where Alfred Schutz's thought is given considerable consideration. I shall limit myself to direct references to phenomenology.

[26] His position was not casually formalised and discussed as a *direct perception theory account*. See S. GALLAGHER, *Direct Perception in the Intersubjective Context*, in: «Consciousness and Cognition», vol. XVII, 2008, pp. 535-543. For a critical discussion, see P. JACOB, *The Direct Perception Model of Empathy: A Critique*, in: «Review of Philosophy and Psychology», vol. II, n. 3, 2011, pp. 519-540; S. SPAULDING, *Phenomenology of Social Cognition*, in: «Erkenntnis», vol. LXXX, n. 5, 2015, pp. 1069-1089.

[27] See M. SCHELER, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie,* cit., pp. 232-258. The last paragraph of the third section is called: *Fremdwahrnehmung*. D. ZAHAVI, *Self and Other*, cit., pp. 115-132, decides to define empathy using Scheler's position on sympathy because of the distinction between the self and the other, which also stands for sympathy. The fact that, according to Scheler, the "givenness of the other" stands on an original vital-unconscious indistinction («an undifferentiated flux of experiences») that reproduces itself in cases of ideological subordination or deference to leading opinions is considered a second order phenomenon. See M. SCHELER, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie,* cit., p. 62 and pp. 239-240. This is one of the starkest points of collision between Husserl and Stein. See L. BOELLA, *Il paesaggio interiore e le sue profondità*, in: M. SCHELER, *Il valore della vita emotiva*, Guerini, Milano 1999, pp. 11-45.

[28] See M. SCHELER, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*, cit., p. 56 and pp. 233-237.

[29] *Ivi*, pp. 245-246.

[30] *Ivi,* p. 77. See also E. HUSSERL, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1929-1935). Dritter Teil*, in: E. HUSSERL, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. XV, hrsg. von I. KERN, Martinus Njihoff, The Hague 1973, pp. 11-12; E. HUSSERL, *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge* (1931), in: E. HUSSERL, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. I, hrsg. von S. STRASSER, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1950.

[31] Stein and Husserl investigated the expressive relation between body and mind. This point represents a moment of fruitful exchange between them. See E. STEIN, *Zum Problem der Einfühlung*,

cit., pp. 93-103.
[32] See M. MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phénomenologie de la perception* (1945), Gallimard, Paris 1976.
[33] E. HUSSERL, *Cartesianische Meditationen*, cit., pp. 123-126.
[34] M. SCHELER, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*, cit., p. 230.
[35] D. ZAHAVI, *Self and Other*, cit., p. 151, pp. 138-140, pp. 168-170.
[36] *Ivi,* p. 152.
[37] *Ivi,* p. 170. See also D. ZAHAVI, *Phenomenology, Empathy and Mindreading*, in: H.L. MAIBOM (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Empathy*, Routledge, London / New York 2017, pp. 33-43. For an explicit assertion of the "founding" role of the *direct perception theory,* see J. KIVERSTEIN, *Empathy and Responsiveness to Social Affordances*, in: «Consciousness and Cognition», vol. XXXVI, 2015, pp. 532-542.
[38] D. ZAHAVI, *Beyond Empathy: Phenomenological Approaches to Intersubjectivity*, in: «Journal of Consciousness Studies», vol. VIII, n. 5-7, 2001, pp.151-167.
[39] See L. BOELLA, *Edith Stein*, in: A. CIMINO, V. COSTA (eds.), *Storia della fenomenologia*, Carocci, Roma 2012, pp. 145-158.
[40] See M. GUBSER, *The Far Reaches. Phenomenology, Ethics and Social Renewal in Central Europe*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2014.
[41] See E. LEVINAS, *Entre nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*, Grasset, Paris 1991.
[42] See J. HALPERN, *From Detached Concern to Empathy. Humanizing Medical Practice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York 2001.