

Mentalizing: the cognitive aspect of empathy

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Abstract

At the base of concise considerations about what it means empathy and cognitive empathy, this work would like to provide an alternative way, maybe a new one, concerning the understanding of this phenomenon.

The central issue linked at the cognitive aspect of empathy is its potential epistemic use and if this represents a valid scientific knowledge; *la quaestio* is if the way of approaching other minds is the same used for any other knowledge or it has aspects and different structural peculiarities, maybe, together with the metaphysic problem of choice, the *free will*.

Keywords: *empathy, sympathy, mirror neurons, mindreading, free will, freempathy.*

The “empathy issue”

In the last decades, thanks to the growing cultural climate with the encounter of two subjects seemingly far from methods, but not for object of research – neuro-sciences and ethic -, it has been brought to the attention of the world of science the empathy. Certainly, the discovery of mirror neurons, if for some has provided dignity and pragmatism to the object of investigation, for some it has not completely “drained” the phenomenon itself, but it has helped to give the input for a “re-conceptualize” of the issue.

The object of attention in the traditional moral philosophy with the term *congeniality*, this *passion* used to indicate:

“[...] the most rare quality of human nature, both in itself and for itself, and for its consequences, of our propension of feeling fondness for others, and to receive for communication the inclinations and the feelings of others, very different and also opposite to ours [...]”¹

so much so, Hume claims:

“[...] In general, we can observe that the human minds are mirrors of one another, not only because they reflect reciprocally their emotions, but also because these rays of passion, feelings and opinions reverberate until they slowly disappear, insensibly”².

The discretion, therefore, able to interact and participate at the emotions of others that arises in who observes the manifestation of feelings from who directly makes an action:

“Neither a theory of knowledge of organic life nor a theory of knowledge of historic sciences of the spirit, can deny the issue of congeniality”³

¹ DAVID HUME, *Trattato sulla natura umana*, 1874-1875, 332, Laterza, Bari, 2008, p. 381.

² *Ibidem*, p. 382.

³ MAX SCHELER, *Essenza e Forme della Simpatia*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2010, p. 36.

as a gnoseological function of the other; in a direct and “favoured” access of the “inner reality” of the You rather than the I.

Central, here, is the matter of the knowledge of others nor through the logical-rational forms of psychic life, chained in the precepts and rational laws tout court, but furthermore the awareness of what already Aristotele claimed: *rational* – irrationality, sensitivity, instinct – *animals*. Not by chance, indeed, congeniality has been already defined as a sensitive answer to the basement of the moral action from philosophers like Hume himself, Smith or Scheler that return, nowadays, in theories and positions about the empathy not far from those known.

Contrary to the ethic formalism of Kant, that had erased from the moral life any form of feelings and emotion in favour of the moral foundation to a universal law of rational style (diminishing, in this way, the ethic life of contents in favour of an empty formalism rather than any need for happiness), Scheler was the spokesperson of the *universal* material ethic in which the sphere of sensitivity enters in full scale into the moral action. If for Kant, then, the moral discussion was universal as in formal – led by reason – for Scheler is universal as in sensitive: feelings and emotions, indeed, are the direct access to the impartial and universal values nor construed from the changeability of the experience, but realized directly through the intentional feeling that reveals the existence of moral assets and values in the objective hierarchy among principles⁴. Connected to different level of feelings, the hierarchy of values allows the individual to intentionally go towards the other individuals that reveals itself to be an immediate unit of living and the experience had; a “*sinolo*” (hylomorphism) of past experiences and experiences lived by the individual having interaction with others.

At this level, then, the moral action, based upon the natural “spirituality” of each person, translates itself in *identification with one another*, the perception in itself of the itself in others, an “*hyper-feeling*” able to “open” the I to the intersubjectivity and the “inner reality” of the You.

From the Greek term *sympátheia* to the English one of *empathy* the mandatory transformation has been represented by the German term *Einfühlung* which, in the aesthetic tradition, meant “becoming absorbed” from the contemplation of the Arts and, in 1909, it was translated from the American psychologist Edward Titchener, turning into the common word *empathy*: from the Greek *en*, “in”, *pathos*, “feeling”, the term meant “entering other peoples’ feelings”, making the feeling your own by observing the individual affected.

The use in a different range than the aesthetic was introduced by Sigmund Freud in his book, by 1921, *Group psychology and the analysis of the ego*, underlining that process which was able to understand the other from yourself; but if for the father of the psychoanalysis the process just described was translated with the German term *Einfühlung*, it was only with the founder of the humanistic psychology, Carl Rogers, that the term *empathy* began to spread around.

It was immediately evident, as well, that the translation made by Titchener took as *conditio sine qua non* to the phenomenon manifestation a loyal human participation to some of the interpretations given by the history of human thinking to the *sympátheia* which the hermeneutic tradition, above all, was coming from: the connection between the cognitive aspect and the human emotion.

If the first one used to take the contemporary meaning that progressively took *sympátheia* (understanding the way meta-representational of the state of mind of others), the latter used to refer at the ability of living on yourself, in yourself, the emotion or the feeling that the individual was involved.

⁴ Cfr. MAX SCHELER, *Il formalismo nell’etica e l’etica materiale dei valori*, Bompiani, Torino, 2013.

A difference that in later studies about empathy was essential to the ethical analysis, psychological and, above all, ethical of the phenomenon as much as to distinguish, according to certain laws and mechanisms, respectively the primary empathy to the secondary one.

The empathy, the congeniality and the emotional contamination

It is very common to fall in thegnoseological mistake of exchanging an emotional attitude, maybe shared by the present individuals, for the emphatic manifestation, ending in many “labels” that do not describe the complexity of such issue. Therefore, it is very important to underline the ontological difference between empathy, congeniality and emotional contamination, and understanding in which way the neurophysiological mechanisms can enter the emphatical process and in which measure they are able to explain it.

Using a Schelerian terminology, the phenomenons of *con-gioire* (cheering together with another individual) and *con-patire* (feeling sorry for someone) are very different from *ri-vivere* (living a moment again), because the central aspects of *Einfühlung* are:

1. The “givenness” of the suffering of others;
2. The knowledge, a bit superficial, of someone else’s living;

elements which provide the “existence of psychic essences of others”, and “to be given” someone else’s suffering that can be understood “directly turning into it”⁵. This is clearly highlighting an emotional phenomenon that it is different, ontologically andgnoseologically, from the empathy, defined as “the union or emotional fusion with other beings or objects (considered alive)”⁶, as an epistemological instrument that “opens” to the others, making possible not only the understanding of someone else’s feelings, but also the perception, in first person, of the same feeling over ourselves. The congeniality, indicated above, takes a step away from the emotional contamination, which means the capacity of “catching” someone else’s emotions automatically and involuntarily but as well the emotional imitation of the observed affection level.

About the peculiarity of the emphatic phenomenon there are different definitions that attempts to explain the predisposition to the intersubjectivity (“putting yourself in someone else’s shoes”), noticing “an affection, which is directly felt, thought or inferred, from another human being”⁷; “not knowing what someone does, but knowing what someone feels when he/she does it”⁸ or, as Simon Baron-Cohen claimed, “there is empathy when we stop to focus on our attention one way only (single-minded), adopting instead a two-ways type of attention (double-minded)”⁹. In general, it points out the “spark from where it was born the human interest for others”¹⁰, the essential and primary element of pro-social moral behaviour in which the role of emotion and sensitivity push to the interest for the other in the form of help, of generosity or motivation to help.

In truth, defining the empathy as simultaneous existence of the same feeling in the observer and the observee could not transpire its complexity, therefore it would seem preferable to choose a definition “in negative” in order to explain it: not so much what is the manifested

⁵ MAX SCHELER, *Essenza e Forme della Simpatia*, op. cit., p. 43.

⁶ Cfr. N. ABBAGNANO (A CURA DI), *Dizionario di Filosofia Terza Edizione aggiornata e ampliata da Giovanni Fornero*, lemma *Empatia*, Utet, Torino, 2006.

⁷ Cfr. CLAUS LAMM, TANIA SINGER, *La neuroscienza sociale dell’empatia*, articolo reperibile all’indirizzo: <http://www.researchgate.net/publication/282773126>.

⁸ Cfr. BEATRICE CENTI, *Empatia e Cultura*, Sistemi Intelligenti/ a. XXIII, n. 2, 2011.

⁹ SIMON BARON-COHEN, *La scienza del male. L’empatia e le origini della crudeltà*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Azzate (Varese), 2012, p. 13.

¹⁰ MARTIN HOFFMAN, *Empatia e sviluppo Morale*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2000, p. 23.

result (emotional consonance), but what are the underlying processes which make it possible. In this case, we should define it as “involvement of psychological processes that make sure the feelings of a person are more suited at the situation of somebody else than his/her own”¹¹. From a purely phenomenological point of view, the manifestation of empathic phenomenon occurs in different steps:

1. The existence of a state of affection;
2. A state of affection in the observer isomorphic at the state of affection of the observee;
3. A state of affection in the observer aroused by the observation or the imagination [n.d.r.] of an emotional state present in another person;
4. The awareness that the affective state of the other is the source of our own affective state¹².

A phenomenology that result completely absent in the empathic preactivation, characterized by having an involuntary, preverbal and preconscious nature from which the *mimesis*, the *classical conditioning* and the *direct association*¹³ are exemplificative phenomena.

The primary empathy. Short considerations.

In the case of typical neurobiological mechanisms of the *primary empathy*, it is a very common epistemological mistake, for example, identifying the neurobiological root of the empathy in the *mirror neurons*: the same Vittorio Gallese claims that reaching to a neurophenomenological model of the empathy is not enough to reduce it to a *mirror* system, but it is necessary a metacognitive and emotional-affective system that, like the model of the *embodied simulation*, it would contribute to generate it¹⁴.

If you want to start a neuroanatomical study of empathy, surely we could not ignore the mention of other areas of the brain that contribute to the complexity of the phenomenon¹⁵, but that, certainly, according to current knowledge, do not exhaust the neuroanatomical analysis. Consider, for example, the prefrontal medial cortex, fundamental for the processing of social information, comparing one's vision with that of others; the orbit-frontal cortex, able to understand semantically words or phrases related to emotionality; the anterior cingulate cortex and the anterior insula, also called areas of “pain empathy”, able to perceive the pain of others both when observed and when they are experienced in the first person; the somato-sensorial cortex, capable of sensually transporting the pain of others on the body itself; the amygdala, involved in emotional learning and emotional regulation; the temporoparietal junction, the superior temporal sulcus, the frontal operculum and the inferior frontal gyrus, finally, areas involved in the mirror system described and discovered by Giacomo Rizzolatti and colleagues¹⁶ in the 90s.

Consequence of the interweaving and the relationship between neuroscientific studies and cognitive sciences has been the identification of two main aspects linked to the empathic

¹¹ *Idem*, p. 54.

¹² F. DE VIGNEMONT, T. SINGER, *The empathic brain: How, when and why?* in “Trends Cogn. Sci.”, 10, 2006, pp. 435-441.

¹³ MARTIN HOFFMAN, *Empatia e sviluppo Morale*, op. cit., pp. 61-74.

¹⁴ VITTORIO GALLESE, *Corpo vivo, simulazione incarnata e intersoggettività: una proposta neurofenomenologica* in M. CAPPUCINO (A CURA DI), *Neurofenomenologia. Le scienze della mente e la sfida dell'esperienza cosciente*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano, 2006, pp. 293-326.

¹⁵ S. BARON-COHEN, *La scienza del male*, op. cit., pp. 13-36.

¹⁶ Cfr. GIACOMO RIZZOLATTI E CORRADO SINIGAGLIA, *So quel che fai. Il cervello che agisce e i neuroni specchio*, Cortina Raffaello, Milano, 2006.

phenomenon: the basic one, linked to neural functioning, and the cognitive one, more recent evolutionarily, which, always starting from the development of the ventromedial and prefrontal cortices, it would allow the epistemological understanding of the emotional sphere of others¹⁷. Not by chance, in fact, the same Gallese, trying to conjugate the purely neurobiological aspect (the *mirror* system - the theory of *embodied simulation*) to the cognitive one, as an openness to intersubjectivity, claimed that “the body is an intrinsically teleological organism”¹⁸ which, through touch, provides us with a “representative architecture”¹⁹ of the other, creating a “us-centric space” of intersubjectivity, called *the Multiple System of Sharing of Intersubjectivity*²⁰.

The operation of Gallese is to give to the primary empathy the *ratio* before cognitive empathy, that is the theorization of a neurobiological model able to explain the reason why one is able to “read the mind” of others.

Precisely because of this complexity, several authors, including Hoffman, argue that in order to properly speak of empathy one must distinguish the involuntary, pre-conscious and pre-verbal activation mechanisms from conscious and voluntary ones: activation circuits that, regardless of the analysis, they differ in the metacognitive aspect; absent in the first cases, present in the seconds.

The mentalizing: doubts and perplexities of a phenomenon

The direct access, albeit mediated, to the emotional sphere of others, then, requires a cognitive effort on the part of the observer to understand that of the victim - in a model like “victim-observer” - that is, a time of thought that allows the cognitive processing of the emotionality suffered or experienced by the other.

The mechanisms of *aletheia* - if you allow me the term - call into question the authentic empathic phenomenon in its cognitive aspect, meaning the role played by the observer’s understanding of the emotional state of others, imagining not only in a similar situation, but perceiving of itself the same emotional state of the victim. A conceptual effort that allows us to “enter the shoes of others” or, in another way, to understand the mind. The “mind reading” or *mentalizing*, therefore, represents the most controversial aspect of the empathic phenomenon, because if it is true that there is a certain current of thought that proposes a significant correlation between *Leib* and *Korper*, it is equally true that the same concept of mind is very debated.

From the epistemological point of view, approaching the “mind problem” means, first of all, ask yourself the primary question of understanding:

1. what is this capacity, perhaps not purely human, which allows man to know himself²¹, *in primis*, and to relate to others, *in secundis*²²;
2. the assumption to understand the intentions, the volitions and the thoughts of other minds;

¹⁷ S. G. SHAMAY, TSOORY, J. AHARON- PERETZ, D. PERRY, *Two systems for empathy: A double dissociation between emotional and cognitive empathy in inferior frontal gyrus versus ventromedial prefrontal lesions* in “Brain”, 132 (3), 2008, pp. 617-627.

¹⁸ ANDREA VELARDI, *Possibilità e limiti dell’empatia. Una discussione filosofica sul riduzionismo e l’ottimismo naturalista delle altre scienze cognitive*, in “NeaScience”, 8, anno 2, p. 98.

¹⁹ *Ivi*.

²⁰ VITTORIO. GALLESE, *La molteplice natura delle relazioni interpersonali: la ricerca di un comune meccanismo neurofisiologico*, in “Networks”, 1, 2003, pp. 24-47

²¹ Cfr. GIOVANNI REALE, *Socrate. Alla scoperta della sapienza umana*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2001.

²² Cfr. TIM CRANE, *Fenomeni mentali. Un’introduzione alla filosofia della mente*, Cortina Raffaello, Milano, 2003.

3. not to neglect, finally, the ability of each Self to know each other through that continuous maieutic process of incessant interrogation between self and self with others.

This, metaphysically, would lead to the elaboration of the conceptual contents of other minds, questioning no longer on the “mental states” of others, but on the way in which others understand others from themselves. This led to the elaboration of a mental cognition of one’s own and others defined *in the first and third person*: if in the first case the problem of self-knowledge is addressed, as a privileged access to the set of beliefs, volitions and emotional states that characterize the in the second, the problem of other minds is addressed, theorizing, that is to say, that the manifest behaviors of the other are the resultant of many beliefs, intentions and volitions of the minds of others, accessible, gnoseologically, precisely through empathy²³.

An instrument, the latter, able to attribute mental states to other agents (*third-person perspective*), starting from the ability to understand oneself (*first-person perspective*)²⁴.

Theorizing the simultaneous presence of multiple minds in a social context and, therefore, sharing the *Theory of Mind* - or, abbreviated, ToM - would perhaps be the basis of an evolutionary adaptation mechanism²⁵ that would form the foundation of the inter-personal relationship the ability of every sentient being to understand the other through their own conceptual hypotheses on the contents of the mind of others: in this way, the process of “metaconceptualization” would allow us to *empathize* with others, understanding their intentions not through reasoning or assumed purely rational, but entrusting *prima facie* to the emotional, irrational sphere of feelings and emotions²⁶.

Depending on the interpretation of the mechanisms underlying the *mentalizing*, epistemological approaches are differentiated from the role played by empathy in intersubjectivity.

The simulationists, for example, are those who claim that, starting from the basic mechanisms, the observer relives neurobiologically the feeling observed as *internal simulation*: Gallese, in this regard, argues that “the ability to understand others as intentional agents far from being *exclusively* dependent on mentalistic-linguistic competences, but it is also strongly dependent on the relational nature of action. According to this hypothesis, it is possible to directly understand the sense of the basic actions of others thanks to a motor equivalence between what others do and what the observer *can do*”²⁷. Thanks to the discovery of the *mirror system* and other brain areas it is known that the same nervous structures involved in the first-person experience of emotions or sensations are active even when they are observed in others: precisely for this reason, simulationists speak of *embodied cognition* or “mirroring” to witness that the empathic process, taking manifest behavior, also includes the mental state of the observed. The *extended substance* and the *thinking substance* are two levels of description of reality separated only by linguistic use²⁸.

²³ ALVIN GOLDMAN, *Simulating Mind: The Philosophy, Psychology and Neuroscience*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, p.5.

²⁴ Cfr. W. SELLARS, *Empiricism and the philosophy of mind* in H. FEIGL E M. SCRIVEN (A CURA DI), *Minnesota studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. I, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1956.

²⁵ Cfr. DANIEL DENNETT, *L’atteggiamento intenzionale*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1993.

²⁶ Cfr. LAURA BOELLA, *Sentire l’altro. Conoscere e praticare l’empatia*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano, 2006.

²⁷ VITTORIO GALLESE, *Corpo non mente. Le neuroscienze cognitive e la genesi di soggettività ed intersoggettività*, Educazione Sentimentale, 20, 2013, p. 13.

²⁸ VITTORIO GALLESE, *La molteplice natura delle relazioni interpersonali: la ricerca di un comune meccanismo neurofisiologico*, Networks, 1, 2003, pp. 24-47.

If, then, simulationists entrust empathy with the role of grasping and “reproducing” the observed emotion neurobiologically, of different positions are the *Theorists of the Theory*, according to which the mental states of others are not only the expression of a sensory sphere, but the resulting constructs of a set of further concepts that would manifest themselves in the same mental states: the observer, so that he could “put himself/herself in the shoes of others”, would need a general, psychological theory that explains the intentions, from which to derive, consequently, the mental state of the observed.

The substantial difference between the first and the second approach is played precisely on the role played by the cognitive aspect: absent in the first; present in the second. Only, in fact, thanks to a previous conceptualization on the “psyche” or the “mind”, the theoretical of the theory, using the tool of empathy, can grasp the mental state of others, since *mentalizing* is made possible by the practical application of their conceptual constructs to manifest behavior. The role of basic empathy is completely absent.

Moreover, the *Theorists of the Theory* differ from the role exercised by the set of concepts or beliefs used by the observer to give meaning and meaning to the intentions of the observed: in the first case, the theoretical *corpus* would be provided by psychology of common sense (*Theorists of External Theory*); in the second, *folk psychology* would certainly have a central role for the understanding of beliefs and volitions regarding the mind, but its function would be propaedeutic to the innate structures that make the reading of the mind possible (*Theorists of Internal Theory*)²⁹.

The role of empathy, for the *Theorists of Theory*, would be that of a cognitive tool, I would dare to say “phenomenological”, for the ascertainment, through the psychology of common sense, of the emotional sphere of others to understand it within pre-established pseudo-cognitive “schemes”.

It is no coincidence, in fact, that especially for what concerns the *Theorists of External Theory*, the meta-cognitive effort is reduced to the minimum, since it is only through conceptual triviality and obviousness, organized “rationally”, which translates into behavior *signifying* an otherwise chaotic context. To this end, the thought of David Lewis is enlightened, who claims that: “Collect all the obviousness that you can think about the causal relationship of mental states, sensorial stimuli and motor responses [...]. Add also the obviousness to the effect that one mental state falls under another [...]. Perhaps there are also banalities of other forms. Include only the obviousness that is common knowledge between us: everyone knows them and everyone knows that each other knows them, and so on”³⁰, such that “We can say that the mental concepts that include our daily psychology or common sense - as beliefs, desires, hopes, pain, etc. - they are part of an integrated network of concepts, so that understanding one of these concepts requires the understanding of someone or everyone else”³¹. It is only the theoretical context, therefore, that gives meaning to the meaning of the terms used for the description of mental states, minimizing both the meta-cognitive aspect of the indigest and the concept of empathy, emptied of meaning.

Without going into the criticisms and objections to the *Theorists of External Theory*, it is good to note that in this approach, according to the brief description provided, the empathic phenomenon is not understood as the perception, on oneself, of the observed emotion,

²⁹ Cfr. I. RAVENSCROFT, *Folk psychology as a theory*, Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy, 2004.

Articolo reperibile on-line all'indirizzo: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/folkpsych-theory/>

³⁰ DAVID LEWIS, *Psychological and theoretical identification*, Australian Journal of Philosophy, 50, 1972, p. 212.

³¹ MARTIES DAVIES, TONY STONE, *The mental simulation debate: a progress report* in P. CARRUTHERS E P. K. SMITH (A CURA DI), *Theories of Theories of Mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 121.

“putting yourself in someone else shoes”, but it is transfigured as a phenomenological instrument of mere observation of the existence of a manifest sentiment: the gnoseological, deductive and partly epistemological aspect is completely absent. In that case, then, one should not talk about empathy or cognitive aspect of the empathic phenomenon in relation to *mentalizing*, but simply of an approach *tout court* to the mental phenomenon.

The position of the *Theorists of Internal Theory* would seem slightly different, since “The dominant explanatory strategy proceeds by placing an internally represented ‘knowledge structure’ - typically a body of rules and principles or propositions - which serves to guide the execution of the capacity that must be explained. These rules, principles or propositions are often described as the ‘theory’ of the agent about the domain in question. In some cases, the theory can be partially accessible to consciousness; the agent can tell us some of the rules or principles he is using. More often, however, the agent does not have conscious access to the knowledge that drives his behavior”³².

The innate structures referred to by the *Theorists of Internal Theory* would be those that make possible the manifestation of consciousness, capable, as above mentioned, of giving an account, in part, of the explanation of the mental states of others through obviousness acquired as their own. An apparently *first-person* interpretation in which, once again, both the meta-cognitive aspect and the role of empathy proper are lacking.

Starting the *reading of the mind* of a victim that manifests evident signs of suffering, not reproducing “internally” - not in simulationistic terms - the observed feeling, is not a sign of empathy or even of a “first person” *mentalizing* effort: the explanation in fact, it derives from the *corpus* of banality and obviousness of *folk psychology* that only partially would be accessible to the conscience of its user.

Also in this case, therefore, *mindreading* would be brought back to the “mind problem”, surmountable, perhaps, by marrying one or another theory of the *Philosophy of Mind*.

The central problem linked to the cognitive aspect of empathy is its possible epistemological use and if this represents scientifically valid knowledge; the *quaestio* is whether the way to approach the other minds is the same one used for any other knowledge or has different structural aspects and peculiarities.

One of the hermeneutical errors related to the use of common sense psychology as the theoretical context within which agents operate is that, according to Karsten Stueber, of not considering the latter as being endowed with rationality and adopting an *abstract perspective* for the explanation of *folk psychology*: beliefs or desires are used as simple mental states that allow others to behave with certain confidence.

The dubious aspect of this perspective would lie in the contingent self-referentiality of the action to be explained without considering, as mentioned above, that the agent, when he acts, acts in a *first person* perspective, using himself as a prototype of the behavior observed at the equal to its own.

A *perspective ‘engaged’* of the psychology of common sense that would give to the latter the theoretical element of *mentalizing* and to its user the guarantee of the rationality of the action³³. In this context, then, the “privileged role of empathy depends on the fundamental recognition that we, in the practices of psychology of common sense, see the other as a rational agent acting for reasons”³⁴ and “understanding of the way in which a thought can be

³² STEPHEN STICH E SHAUN NICHOLS, *Folk psychology: simulation or tacit theory?*, Mind and Language, 7, 1995, pp. 35-36.

³³ Cfr. KARSTEN STUEBER, *L’empatia*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2010.

³⁴ *Idem*, p. 124.

a reason for someone requires at least that it is possible to recognize how a thought can be a thought that someone recognizes as its own”³⁵.

The main point in assigning at the empathy an epistemic role would not only be to recognize the ability to create “spaces of similarity” (Quine) perceptive of neurobiological interaction, but would reside in the “indissicability of thought”: each prediction, in first person, makes sense only if connected to the context of its own reasons, giving intelligibility to behaviors that mean more and more with respect to what they manifest³⁶. In Stueber’s words: “this is possible [...] only if we are able to integrate these thoughts into our cognitive perspective, identifying them with our imagination as our thoughts that can be reasons for our actions”³⁷, thus giving to empathy, the role that, by definition, competes to: take on itself the beliefs attributed by a *third-person* perspective, identifying them as their own, from a *first-person* perspective.

The problem of this approach is, in my opinion, not having highlighted to which mechanism of activation - voluntary or involuntary - is attributable to empathy itself: relegating the role of the neurobiological aspect of empathy, should, consequently, refer to an activation of the empathic process in a conscious way, but the next problem that arises lies in the fact that the direct observation of a victim would activate the automatic, pre-unconscious, pre-verbal mechanisms of the phenomenon that would fall outside its cognitive aspect. This would be able to put the emphasis not on his own suffering, but on that observed and eventually experienced on the other by himself? At what level, that is, do you have empathy? At a pre-unconscious, pre-verbal or conscious and rational level? What, then, do you mean by empathy?

It is true that Stueber sustains that it cannot be reduced to the *mirror* system alone and recognizes the creation of the aforementioned “spaces of perceptive similarity”, but it is true that the empathy described above, the basis for the “next”, does not respond properly to the requirements of cognitive empathy, because:

- in the direct observation of the victim, the basic mechanisms of primary empathy would be activated automatically;
- in imagining the suffering of a hypothetical victim, one could experience this feeling on oneself, but be conditioned according to the information that is possessed on it or, moreover, concentrate on the causes of one’s own suffering, ignoring the victim.

In this case, in fact, rather than the cognitive and epistemic aspect of empathy, one should speak of *egoistic drift*, far from both the genuineness of the phenomenon and the social propensity to help³⁸.

Equipping of rationality that range of beliefs which make up the psychology of common sense means not to use the mental process for the explanation or the elaboration of other minds, but to rely on the pseudoreception that the context could provide. That is to say, the explanation of the place and the context within which empathy would manifest itself is lacking, since the serious limitations to which it is subjected do not make the authenticity of its presence predictable with a certain serenity.

It can be argued, in general, that the limitations to which it is subject depend “on the intensity and salience of the signs of suffering and on the relationship between the victim and the observer”³⁹: *empathic over-activation* and *bias* are those phenomena which have in common the transmigration of suffering caused by the observation of the victim to one’s own, so

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 232.

³⁶ *Idem*, p. 230.

³⁷ *Ivi*.

³⁸ Cfr. MARTIN HOFFMAN, *Empatia e sviluppo morale*, op. cit.

³⁹ *Idem*, p. 233.

painful and intense, that the observer comes out of the empathic feeling. What are the inherent phenomena, for example, the empathic overactivation is still the subject of analysis and research, but it is quite clear to date that the mechanism of blocking the empathic feeling in the observer depends mainly on the *assumption of a centered role about yourself*, that is, by focusing on signals of personal suffering evoked by a situation, by a discourse, by an image that inevitably lead the observer to become a victim of himself/herself, of his psyche: in this case, the empathic feeling is consciously inhibited by the observer by virtue of his own “emotional survival” to the detriment of that of others.

Other examples of serious structural limitations of empathy are *selfish drift* and the *accustomisation* which, respectively, concentrating the attention of the observer from the suffering of the victim to his own or getting used to the sight of another person’s suffering, can lead to the appearance of “defensive strategies” to decrease or control one’s discomfort, thus placing a psychic and emotional distance from the source of the discomfort itself.

The mechanism of the *bias*, moreover, responds, in a general way, to the affective closeness that the observer has with the victim: the kind of *familiarity* and *immediacy* certify, in a few words, that empathy is properly such if it is a family member or a member of their primary group; to testify, for myself, that the *choice, free will*, is the foundation of cognitive empathy.

Conclusions

It is precisely for this last aspect - the entrance into the game of choice - that we can speak of some “shadows” to which the same phenomenon is subject. It is the assumption of “defensive” strategies, partly *conscious* and partly *unaware*, to preserve the observer from his own emotional sphere, *choosing* to remain extraneous to the dramatic event. The problem then becomes to understand what kind of relationship exists between free will and cognitive empathy.

Understanding empathy cognitively means throwing light on the intricate problem of the existence of free will; that, according to a theory still in formation, can unite ethical reflections with neuroscientific and genetic data: what does it tell us, in fact, that it is not the same genes of empathy⁴⁰ that prevent us, for survival, from being “too empathetic”? And if it were, on the contrary, an adaptive strategy? The relation between morality and empathy should also, in my opinion, be observed in a new way: questioning what the relationship of the empathic phenomenon is to morality is only part of the problem; that is only by observing a painting from the hole of a lock: it is partial. It will be interesting to change the point of view of the observer, adopting the magnifying glass of the *free will* no longer as a phenomenon in itself with respect to empathy, but as a global phenomenon, inherent in itself the characteristics of choice and *mentalizing*, giving life to the all-encompassing concept of *freempathy*.

⁴⁰ SIMON BARON-COHEN, *La scienza del male*, op. cit., pp. 107-122.