

In this work the author, through a brief historical-theoretical excursus, aims to fill a conceptual void on the phenomenon of *Mentalizing*, trying to understand with which vicissitudes of thought the *sympathy* of humeana memory has come to the contemporary to "make people talk about themselves", firstly as a *Folk Psychology* and then as "mind reading". With this awareness, therefore, this volume fits into the conceptual tradition of directing the reader or simple onlookers in their research on the subject.

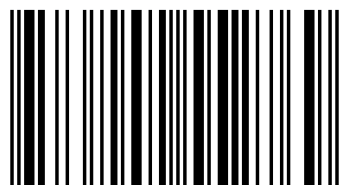


Federica Madonna

# Mentalizing: from the origins to nowadays

Foreword of Francesco Bellino

Federica Madonna, PhD, in her training path, has focused the scientific interest on understanding the inter-relationship between cognitive empathy and free will from a purely moral point of view. Amongst her publications, it is worth mentioning *Il problema aperto della mente in relazione alle neuroscienze. Che cosa ne direbbe, oggi, Cartesio?*



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***Mentalizing:***

**from the origins to nowadays**

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**By Federica Madonna**

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*To my beloved parents:*

*Bruna e Dante*

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## FOREWORD

If the limits of my language are the limits of the world, as Ludwig Wittgenstein argues in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, how can we know the mind and world of others? Solipsism is the consequence of language theory, which considers linguistic elements as signs of immediate experiences. The correspondence between the elements of language and the elements of reality reduces the latter to facts of immediate experience, which are mine alone.

Are we condemned to solipsism? The others are inaccessible, are they just our mental construction? Is it possible to live without the other? How is the ego possible without the You?

Wittgenstein emerged from solipsism, modifying his theory of language. He placed the use of ordinary language in the many forms of daily life at the center of his research. Joseph Makin and colleagues from the University of California in San Francisco recently published the results of their research on the ability to read thoughts in “Nature Neuroscience”. Artificial Intelligence has proven itself capable of transforming brain activity into text. Electrodes were implanted in the brain of four volunteers to monitor their epileptic seizures. Participants were asked to read 50 sentences aloud several times, recording changes in their brain activity, and then entering the data into a machine learning algorithm, which converted them into strings of numbers and then into words. Although Artificial Intelligence has made many mistakes in transcription, this research has opened a path, certainly still very long and tortuous, to read the thought.

Federica Madonna, with a rigorous historical-theoretical approach, offers a valuable scientific contribution, which helps us to overcome scientific solipsism and reductionism, tending to naturalise the mind, bringing it back only to the physical and neuro-physiological components.

This study fills a conceptual void and offers a refined clarification of the meaning of a rich family of concepts (empathy, mirror neurons, sympathy, inter-subjectivity) that

rotate, until they merge, around the concept of *mentalizing* or *mindreading* (“mind reading”).

Starting from Descartes, Hume, Kant, Husserl, Lipps, Quine, Hempel, Nagel, Nozick up to *Simulation Theory*, *Folk Psychology* to *Metacognition*, through Continental Philosophy and Analytical Philosophy, Federica Madonna puts into practice one of the most important functions of philosophy, which is that of the clarification of language and concepts.

The cornerstone of her clarifying activity is to explain *mentalizing* as the possibility of knowing the other person in epistemic terms.

With ample and reasoned documentation and critical acumen, the author offers us a glimpse of the history of philosophy and gives us a series of open problems that concern our moral, inter-subjective life and our very human identity.

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## Introduction

An abused expression in the contemporary context of Human Sciences is that of *empathy*<sup>1</sup>; with this phenomenon it is customary to indicate everything and the opposite of everything, ending in trivialities or inaccuracies which for “employees” is completely inadmissible. What it is and where it originates from is the first problem to solve in order to resolve its inaccuracies; however, as it has come, today, talking about mind reading is a much more complex matter.

The following work was born, therefore, with a dual purpose: on the one hand, to fill a conceptual void; on the other hand, to provide a clarification of the meaning of empathy.

Currently, in fact, to understand the nature of *mentalizing*<sup>2</sup> an assembly operation between the multiple articles that occur, almost daily, on the phenomenon is necessary, leaving the traceability of a red thread that leads the reader by the hand from its origins to its current evolutions unsolved, according to the writer. With this awareness, therefore, this volume fits into the conceptual tradition of directing the reader or simple onlookers in their research on the subject. The work does not claim to trace a “Moral History of *Mindreading*”, but only to indicate the significant stages, the turning points that have guided, influenced, changed and shaped the evolution of an original concept from which the reading of the mind originated, at least according to the writer’s vision. The aim, then, will be to solicit a debate and, why not, theoretically convince the reader of what will be supported on the nature of cognitive empathy.

In order for the purpose to be reached, it was considered necessary to divide the topic into three stages, preparatory to each other, in which, starting from the explanation of what the phenomenon of *mentalizing* is, we then moved on to its short historical discussion. It will be discovered, perhaps surprisingly, that the French philosopher

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<sup>1</sup> With the generic term of empathy, whereas not clearly specified differently from the following text, we are referring to the cognitive empathy only.

<sup>2</sup> In the following pages, you will find the use of expression such as *mentalizing*, *mindreading* or *reading of mind* as synonyms.

René Descartes is, unconsciously, the initiator of the current debate which, between Continental and Analytic tradition, continues to direct and influence the concept of *mindreading* in unsuspected ways. Finally, we will come to the contemporary world in which expressions such as *Folk Psychology* and *Metacognition* are outlining a road bristling with obstacles, which instead of facilitating their understanding they complicate it. In fact, we are convinced that even because of these obstacles, empathy continues to be a phenomenon of which there is no unanimous definition; and it is precisely in this *locus* that the original intention of the writer is manifested, even more clearly: only in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon can errors be avoided in the future.

It is with this wish that I dismiss the text in the press, hoping to help illuminate, albeit partially, a dark path. Lastly, in saying goodbye to the reader, I would like to offer my thanks to my husband, Prof. Silvano Franco, without whom, probably indeed, I certainly would not have had the “courage” to try my hand at such an undertaking.

In dismissing this work in print, I feel obliged to express a profound and heartfelt to Dr. Andrea Bollella for his help in the translation of the text in English.

## Chapter I

### *What is the mentalizing*

When it comes to *mentalizing* or *mindreading* it is unlikely that “non-employees” immediately refer the mind to the concept of cognitive empathy.

If it is true, in fact, that in recent years the latter has returned to the attention of the general public, it is also true that in recent decades there has been a subsequent and progressive linking of notions, sophistications and disciplines, which have further turbid the waters. It is no coincidence that most people find it difficult to define the concept of *mentalizing* as something that has its origins in the “classic” tradition of thought, since, objectively, it is only a few years that this expression affects the cultural debate. In reality, however, if this position is true in some respects it is not true in others; so, things are not quite as they seem to be.

We must therefore take a step backwards, explaining, first of all, what the concept of *mindreading* refers to.

Literally translated, the term means “reading of the mind” and with an effort of imagination one can immediately guess that one enters the world of intersubjectivity or, taking a step forward, of empathy.

Giving a definition of the phenomenon is impossible, since the latter changes according to the way in which the individual author “questions” the phenomenon itself and, above all, from which point of view you explain it; in general, however, when we talk about empathy we usually indicate “putting ourselves in someone else’s shoes”, taking for granted the premise that this means that feeling empathy for the other person means reproducing in oneself the emotion observed in You. The one who conducted an accurate and in-depth study of the phenomenon was the American psychologist Martin Hoffman, who had the methodological intuition that, faced with a multiplicity of definitions and corollaries of the same, to clarify the concept it would have been



necessary define it with a “negative method” or *ad escludendum*: this approach, in fact, led him to define empathy as

*the spark through which human interest in others arises, the ‘glue’ that makes social life possible*<sup>3</sup>.

The *ratio* of the phenomenon, for Hoffman, lies precisely in the expression “human interest for others”: a glue, as he explains immediately afterwards, that would be able to give birth to the interest or concern of an I for a You so that this motivational push moves the subject to “give aid” to the other.

All this would be the basis of the birth of morality; first as a motivation for help, then as altruism and, finally, as a structuring of an ethics, thus configuring empathy as a *pro-social motivation for moral action*<sup>4</sup>.

Regardless of this specific aspect, not relevant for the research in question, a further element introduced by Hoffman is the *conditio sine qua non* for the phenomenon to arise; which is

[...] *the feelings of one person are more consonant with the situation of another than their own*<sup>5</sup>.

Indeed, what was mentioned a little further begins to emerge: “putting yourself in the other’s shoes”, on the one hand, intersubjectivity, on the other.

However, clarification is needed on this aspect.

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<sup>3</sup> MARTIN HOFFMAN, *Empatia e sviluppo morale*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2008, p. 54.

<sup>4</sup> Studies on this aspect have flourished in recent decades attempting to establish what role empathy plays both in morality and in the moral process.

An example of a paradigm opposed to that proposed by Hoffman is that of the American psychologist Daniel Batson. Cfr. DANIEL BATSON ET ALII, *Is empathic emotion a source of altruistic motivation?*, in “Journal of Personality and Social Psychology”, Vol. 40, n. 2, 1981, pp. 290-302; DANIEL BATSON, *Altruism in humans*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011; DANIEL BATSON, *The empathy-Altruism Hypothesis*, Oxford Handbook Online, Oxford, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> MARTIN HOFFMAN, *Empatia e sviluppo morale*, op. cit., p. 54.

At first glance, Hoffman's explanation could be ambiguous: at what level, one might ask, the feelings of the observer (of whom he pushes himself to act for the other) are similar or equal to those of the victim (who feels empathic suffering)?

### 1.1. The basic or primary empathy

The question opens the door to a dual approach to the "empathy problem" which is based on the effervescent cultural climate that, since 2002 - a symbol date - to nowadays, affects knowledge in the broad sense: *neuroethics*<sup>6</sup>; on which, even before his official birth, Hoffman clarifies that in order to talk about empathy, the primary or basic aspect must be separated from the secondary or cognitive one.

The *primary* aspect can be explained by appealing to the concept of *moral naturalisation*; which is a research program that aims to bring ethics back to its neurobiological bases, leading man to be himself the object of study of the natural sciences; in this regard, you will have to be prepared to

1. *Study all human phenomena with the same concepts of Science tout court;*
2. *Study all human phenomena through the laws of physics, assuming that any event has a cause and an effect (this could be problematic for some orders of problems examined by the same moral philosophy as, for example, the concept of choice, of free will or of the mind itself);*
3. *Knowing how to reconstruct over time, artificially, all the emerging phenomena of the human being* <sup>7</sup>,

therefore claiming that man is by his nature led to moral action.

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<sup>6</sup> Cfr. STEVEN J. MARCUS, *Neuroethics: Mapping the Field. Conference Proceedings*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. ANDREA LAVAZZA, *Neuroscienze e filosofia morale*, in "Rivista di Filosofia", Vol. XCVIII, n. 3, dicembre 2007, pp. 327-358 [Translation adjusted to the English language].

In this perspective, the explanation of the famous *mirror system*<sup>8</sup> is to be placed which, since the 1990s, has accompanied any type of discussion regarding empathy; the *team* located in Parma had the merit of opening the doors to a field of investigation that, at the time, was, perhaps, unimaginable, laying the foundations for what would become after: the attempt to explain (the conditional is a must !) of human inter-relational processes on a purely neuro-biological basis. Being aware that the brain “works” in a certain way has had the enormous advantage of starting a more conscious study of cognitive processes. This, however, if on the one hand has favored that climate of continuous and progressive growth that has affected neuroscience, on the other it has fomented a considerable abuse both of the discovery of Rizzolatti, Sinigaglia *et alii* and, in the opinion of the writer, of the renunciation of the effective understanding of the empathic nature.

It is as if, having a “starting point” from which to place the beginning of the phenomenon, the investigation of its *substantia* has gradually been abandoned, generating not only confusions and discordant approaches, but also the construction of collateral problems that perhaps they should not be part of the empathic phenomenon; example in this regard may be the same “label” with which *mentalizing* is denoted. However, this will be discussed in the *Conclusions*.

Returning to the “primary” basis of the phenomenon, there are two necessary considerations: the first, in chronological order, concerns Hoffman's speech; the second the development of the debate over the years.

As mentioned earlier, Hoffman defines *basic* or *primary* empathy as “propensity towards the other”, the nature of which is inserted in the activation of pre-verbal, pre-rational and instinctual mechanisms; this means that, in an observer-victim type situation, the vision of empathic suffering in the latter will be the instinctive *incipit* of the implementation of all brain areas<sup>9</sup> that, functioning globally, will generate the same empathic suffering experienced in the observer himself firsthand on the other.

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<sup>8</sup> Cfr. GIACOMO RIZZOLATTI E CORRADO SINIGAGLIA, *So quel che fai. Il cervello che agisce e i neuroni specchio*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. VITTORIO GALLESE, *Before and below 'theory of mind': embodied simulation and the neural correlates of social cognition*, in “Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B”, 362, 2007, pp. 659-669.

An example of what has been said can be provided by *mimesis* or *mimicry*, that is the involuntary response to an observed emotional state, in which, through imitation, first, and feedback, afterwards, a series of physiological responses are activated in the observer and completely instinctive, unconscious and pre-verbal neuro-biological.

Over the years, as already stated, the growing neuroscientific development has led to the expansion of the areas or brain mechanisms that, in theory, should concern empathic activation; not only by inserting itself into that line of cognitive naturalization, but above all by increasing the idea that an “empathic brain” exists at the basis of any explanation of intersubjectivity.

We refer, for example, to the theory of *Embodied simulation*, proposed and supported both by neuroscientists such as Vittorio Gallese and by philosophers like Alvin Goldman<sup>10</sup>, in which the *mirror* mechanism would be the basis of understanding the other, reproducing internally (at the neurobiological level) the emotion observed; at the same time, it would be able to create “spaces of similarity” (of a phenomenological nature) to relate to the You<sup>11</sup>.

However simplified the re-proposition of the theory of Gallese *et alii*, it highlights, however, the primary use of the mirror system to give an explanation of how man can enter society, leaving out or not highlighting enough that from the years’ 90 to date there have been several other discoveries in this regard.

It is important, in fact, to keep in mind that the empathic phenomenon would seem to affect a dozen brain areas, currently known<sup>12</sup>, which could help understand the various natural / instinctive passages that occur from the activation of the phenomenon to its pre-rational completion, pre- verbal, pre-conscious. Furthermore, we believe that a purely phenomenological approach presents two serious difficulties: the first consists

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<sup>10</sup> For precision’s sake, the *Embodied Simulation* would seem to be a theory that Alvin Goldman had engaged above all in the beginnings of 2000s; currently, as a consequence of the encounter/clash of the *Simulation Theory* (ST) with the *Theory Theory* (TT), would seem to sustain a “hybrid theory” between cognitivism and simulationism. The aspect in regards to the ST and the TT will be discussed in the following chapters.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. VITTORIO GALLESE, *Before and below ‘theory of mind’: embodied simulation and the neural correlates of social cognition*, in “Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B”, 362, 2007, pp. 659-669.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. UTA FRITH E CHRIS FRITH, *Development and neurophysiology of mentalizing*, in “Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences”, 358, 2003, pp. 459-473; GOTTFRIED WILHELM VON LEIBNITZ, *Monadologia*, Bompiani, Milano, 2001.

in the fact that, focusing only on the “observation of the phenomenon”, it would be impossible to speak of *mentalizing*; the second would have, as a consequence, the monadic isolation in Leibnitz<sup>13</sup>, first, and in Husserl<sup>14</sup>, secondly.

For the first aspect, it should be noted, first of all, that if phenomenology is the study of the way phenomena manifest themselves then how would it be possible, in this perspective, to ascertain or “measure” that one is “entering the mind of the other” to try the same emotion afterwards?

It is no coincidence that Leibnitz’s monadic approach leads Edmund Husserl himself to make the *Einfühlung* a transcendental tool to perceive the distinction between *Leib*, what lives, and *Körper*, what is perceived as passive and superficial sensitivity<sup>15</sup>.

If you want, what is basically outlined in the current debate becomes a fundamental characteristic of the “reading of the mind”: a perception, in Husserl’s language, which contradicts itself to acquire a truth other than itself, that is other.

At this point, you enter another sphere of interest; therefore, in another phenomenon.

## 1.2. Cognitive empathy

If as far as described here has concerned the understanding of the multidisciplinary of a particular aspect linked to empathy, affecting the dialogue between neurosciences, on the one hand, and cognitive sciences, on the other, a different discourse must be made for *secondary empathy* or *mentalizing*. This expression is used to mean a cognitive effort by the observer to come to experience an empathic emotion; unlike the automatic mechanisms, which structure the basic empathy, the secondary one is characterized by the existence of three basic requirements:

- the necessary time for decoding the message;
- the cognitive effort to understand it;

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<sup>13</sup> Cfr. GOTTFRIED WILHELM VON LEIBNITZ, *Monadologia*, Bompiani, Milano, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. EDMUND HUSSERL, *Ricerche Logiche*, Il Saggiatore, Milano, 2015 Cfr.

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. EDMUND HUSSERL, *Idee per una fenomenologia pura e per una filosofia fenomenologica. Libro primo. Introduzione generale alla fenomenologia pura*, Einaudi, Torino, 2002.

- the semantic processing, through which the observer / reader creates a *voluntary* psychological distance between himself and the hypothetical victim.

A peculiar aspect lies in the fact that, unlike the first type of empathy, there is no need for the simultaneous presence of the victim and the observer: it is no coincidence, in fact, that time and semantic processing are named as passages “mandatory” of the cognitive phenomenon.

An example, in this regard, is what Hoffman himself defines *role taking* in which the cognitive effort, the role played - in this case - by the imagination, is configured as the setting aside in the observer of one’s ego, one’s psychic world and moral, to introject into that of the hypothetical victim. Hypothetical, since in such cases both “virtual” identification with characters or heroes of Literature as well as moods or emotions transmitted by Poetry are included.

As you can see, so far no mention has been made of the concept or expression proper of “reading the mind”, since, as in the following pages, causes and reasons will be explained, the *mentalizing* expression arises in relatively recent times; here too, if one wanted to indicate a given symbol or a significant period, the essay of the two ethologists could be cited first, Daniel Premack and Guy Woodruff<sup>16</sup> in 1978; secondly, the debate, started in those years, about *Folk Psychology*.

It is only from this particular historical moment that the latter will begin to orient himself on what will become *mentalizing*, passing, first of all, in the cultural vein of the Philosophy of the Mind.

It is difficult to be able to speak of *mindreading* when, in reality, there is no unanimous agreement (probably it could not even exist!) On what this word denotes: what is, in fact, the mind?

The problem is further complicated if we consider the intertwining and the tangle of knowledge and skills which, by now, affects both the realm of speculation, properly so called, and that of the “scientific sciences”, since the contribution of new data on the

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<sup>16</sup> Cfr. DANIEL PREMACK E GUY WOODRUFF, *Does the chimpanzee have a theory of mind?*, in “Behavioral and Brain Sciences”, 4, 1978, pp. 515-629.

cerebral functioning poses a doubt, to many, about the actual existence of the mind itself.

In fact, if we were to accept the naturalised approach that today's cognitive sciences, in part, share then we would face two great difficulties:

1. give an explanation of the mental phenomenon in neuro-biological terms;
2. give an explanation on the ways in which you can talk about *mentalizing*.

On the first point, flourishing are the positions within the Theory of Mind that have alternated over the years to “translate” the “transcendent” or dualistic concept of the mind into a “materialistic” or “physicalist” vocabulary, since, like the English neurobiologist Colin Blakemore claims,

*As understanding of brain function progresses, it is certainly reasonable to ask how such knowledge illuminates themes that have been expressed, formulated or explained in different ways in the past.*

*Epistemology (the theory of knowledge), legal principles, social and political concepts of rights and responsibilities, religious beliefs and behaviors, the philosophical assumptions of science: all this is a product of our brains<sup>17</sup>.*

It is difficult, then, to be able to use one or more correct expressions to define the multiple naturalised intents, as they are

*the terms ‘materialism’ and ‘dualism’ [...] are actually obsolete, and very few of the many participants in the clash would refer to them to describe their position, but as loose and intuitive labels they have the merit of highlighting this clearly what is at stake in the conflict: is it possible to reach a ‘materialistic’ view of the world that also takes account of mental phenomena? Or is reality articulated in (at least) two distinct ontological fields, one leading to the physical and the other to the mental?<sup>18</sup>.*

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<sup>17</sup> COLIN BLAKEMORE, *Foreword* in “Illes”, 2006, pp. V-VI.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. MICHELE DI FRANCESCO E ALFREDO TOMASETTA, *Immaginare e sperimentare. Gli zombie e il problema della coscienza fenomenica*, in “Rivista di Estetica” [online], n. 56, available article online at the following address:

<http://estetica.revues.org/898>

The position of the Portuguese neuroscientist Antonio Damasio is representative of the cultural climate that has developed over the years regarding this “encounter / clash” between apparently discordant approaches and different disciplines; who, in the opinion of the writer, has deeply understood its focus. How can we forget, in fact, the book *Descarte's Error*<sup>19</sup>, in which the author proposes the reversal of the traditional approach to the “mind problem”: no longer “the supremacy” of the concept, but of physicality.

Damasio, in fact, maintains that in the *Metaphysical Meditations*<sup>20</sup>, first, and in the *Principia Philosophiae*<sup>21</sup>, later, Descartes made an epistemological, phenomenological, gnoseological and ontological error, the effects of which are still alive in the entire cultural tradition of the West, reversing the right order of the *cogito* and the *sum*.

Since being born, Damasio claims, the immediately present evolutionary aspect is being: being alive, being oriented towards one's own survival and only after a period of maturation (cerebral, physical) does that cognitive sphere appear that characterises man for his linguistic and reflective skills:

[...] *we are, and therefore we think; and we think only to the extent that we are, since thinking is caused by the structures and activities of being*<sup>22</sup>.

The *Sum ergo cogito*, therefore, and not the *Cogito ergo sum* should have been the summary expression of human nature; the inversion error, in fact, introduced – Damasio continues – that

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<sup>19</sup> Cfr. ANTONIO DAMASIO, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, Putnam Pub Group, New York, 1994, Italian translation, ANTONIO DAMASIO, *L'errore di Cartesio. Emozione, ragione e cervello umano*, Adelphi Edizioni, Milano, 1995. The following citations will refer to the pages of Italian translation.

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. RENATO CARTESIO, *Meditazioni Metafisiche*, Bompiani, Firenze, 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. RENATO CARTESIO, *Principia Philosophiae*, in ADRIANO TILGHER E FRANCESCO ADORNO (Eds), *Opere Filosofiche. Vol. 3: I principi della filosofia*, Edizioni Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> ANTONIO DAMASIO, *L'errore di Cartesio*, op. cit., p. 337 [Translation adjusted to the English language].



*abysmal separation between body and mind - between the matter of the body [...] and the 'cloth' of the mind*<sup>23</sup>

as if recognising the infinite evolutionary complexity of man is equivalent to depleting his dignity.

The “construction of the conscious brain”<sup>24</sup>, in sharp contrast to Descartes’ thesis does not take place, then, for “God’s goodness”, but in space and time: in the identity between the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*, since both are the same *res*. It is in the body, and therefore in the mind, Damasio continues, that its peculiar aspect, the Self, emerges and not as an ontological substance with its own rules and attributes, but as a result of infinite brain complexity (of a complex dynamic system), in which the “frozen accidents” (the neurophysiological structures that survived by heredity and produced by genetic contingency - taking up Darwin) provide the causes for “bringing the Self to mind”.

A purely evolutionary phenomenon, Darwinian in nature, which involves reason and passion, the body and thought, the brain in its specificity.

If what has been said so far constitutes a representative example of the first difficulty to which empathy incurs, if one wanted to explain its nature only in a neuro-biological way, no less would be those encountered for the most controversial aspect of the empathic phenomenon, namely the *mentalization* activity: in what way could the mind reading be translated into “natural” terms?

One of the most important impediments would be to explain how other minds are “understood”; first, one should be able to “neuro-biologically” decode the thoughts so that, later, it can be assumed, with some accuracy, that the latter are the result of a perfect consonance between the neuronal substrate (their physical nature) and the “metaphysical” concept of which they would be the banner. As if this were not enough, going further one should identify a two-way correlation between the parties, common

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<sup>23</sup> *IDEM*, p. 338.

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. ANTONIO DAMASIO, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*, Italian translation ANTONIO DAMASIO, *Il sé viene alla mente. La costruzione del cervello cosciente*, Adelphi Edizioni, Milano, 2012.

to many more people than to the individual, capable of starting a real program of reading the intentions and volitions of others; only in this way could the “reading of the mind” begin.

These and other difficulties are at the basis of the problem of mentalizing, also because in identifying the logical-conceptual history of the concept there has been a shift from a purely epistemological problem to a purely gnoseological one (the current one) through which the union is usually built

*Mentalizing = gnoseological knowledge of other minds,*

by passing through the emotional sphere.

The many authors interested in / engaging in the debate on empathy thought that, starting from this strange ability to understand the other, a general definition of empathy could have been provided; the result of this intention was the identification of five general approaches<sup>25</sup> through which the empathy itself can be defined:

1. *Temperamental or personality variables related to empathy – related responding*; empathy can be defined starting from the emotional intensity which the observer participates with the suffering of the victim, considering as variables its temper and its personality.

A consideration that is urgent to underline in this first address is the following: given the difficulties already mentioned, how would it be possible to define empathy if the “reading of the mind” of the victim is excluded from the phenomenon?

This deduction is due to the fact that the one described is the standard archetype of basic or primary empathy, in which the phenomenon is characterised by the unconscious activation of the neuro-biological mechanisms underlying the same pre-verbal, pre-rational.

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. NANCY EISEMBERG E TRACY L. SPINRAD, *Prosocial Emotion*, in VANESSA LOBUE, KORALY PÉREZ-EDGAR, KRISTIN A. BUSS (EDS.), *Handbook of Emotional Development*, Springer, New York (USA), 2019.

In this way, there would be only one further example of the application of basic empathy with an undue addition: the personality of the observer. It should be explained how this aspect can influence the typical instinctuality of the mechanisms mentioned above; as often happens in the literature, it turns out to be an obsolete element that only contributes to muddying the waters.

2. *The development of empathy-related responding*; for some years now, there have been many studies born on the emotional (empathic?) development of children from their earliest stages of cognitive development.

Also in this case this approach promises to provide a deeper understanding and more pertinent to what will become the mature sphere of any adult; where, however, a “module” responsible for “reading the mind” should be identified, how could a neurobiological explanation of the inter-relationship of one man with another be given, according to the peculiarities typical of the empathic phenomenon in its cognitive meaning?

3. *The relation of empathy-related reactions to social behaviour, including prosocial behaviour, aggression and social competence*; resuming and reproducing the Milgram experiment, attention was paid to the way in which the perpetrator’s empathy annihilates in front of the figure of authority or how, on the other hand, empathy could be the motivation for the agent to implement a prosocial behavior, perhaps based on altruism.

This approach raises a doubt that, at present, has not been resolved: how can we define the possible relationship between empathy and altruism if there is no unanimous definition of the same empathy? Consequently, a multiplicity of theories or hypotheses would result which, depending on the peculiarities considered in the phenomenon in question, would give one or another answer. This would imply the relativity of responses that cannot be extended to an albeit hypothetical “objectivity”. Furthermore, it must be borne in mind that conferring pragmaticity on a purely theoretical concept means giving it reliability and credibility<sup>26</sup>: a complicated step in a similar approach.

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<sup>26</sup> Cfr. LEE J. CRONBACH E PAUL E. MEEHL, *Construct validity in psychological tests*, in “Psychological Bullett”, n. 52, 1955, pp. 281-387.

4. *Gender differences in empathy-related reactions*, it is an attempt of giving an explanation about why a genre would be more inclined to feel empathy in respect of another;
5. *Socialization correlates*, the limits to which empathy is subject are highlighted, referring, in particular, to the agent's different response to a victim's situation of suffering: from a family member or close relative to a perfect stranger.

This approach also highlights a very serious structural limit of cognitive empathy: the *selfish drift*. It was found that in the face of the suffering of a victim (whose physical existence can only be hypothetical, imagined or, simply, far from the simultaneous presence with the observer), the latter, while initiating a cognitive effort to “mentalise” with the You, find yourself shifting your attention not to the other, but to itself. Starting from the suffering of a hypothetical victim, the observer is as if he were inspired by this situation to start a reading of the mind not of the other, but of himself.

The selfish drift represents, if you like, the contemporary challenge to the debate on *mentalizing*, since it would seem to drop any theory on intersubjectivity that bases empathy. Any phenomenon it denotes.

If so it was, how to explain the fact that some studies claim that an agent is able to “empathise” only and exclusively towards his / her own family group?<sup>27</sup>

This would further undermine not only the concept of empathy itself, but also the *ratio* of wanting to explain the *social animal* of Aristotelian memory in terms of innate abilities.

In fact, there is an ethical and moral problem that is not secondary to what has already been stated: what would it mean to feel cognitive empathy for the other? In what sense could it be argued that “entering the mind of others” would mean knowing, epistemologically and gnoseologically, mental states, thoughts, beliefs and volitions?

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<sup>27</sup> Cfr. MICHAELA B. UPSHAW, CHERYL R. KAISER E JESSICA A. SOMMERVILLE, *Parent's empathic perspective taking and altruistic behavior predicts infant's arousal to others' emotions*, in “Frontiers in Psychology”, article available online at the following address:

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00360/full>

The conversation inevitably becomes complicated, since in the background a significant distinction stands out in the attitude or intention of those who “empathize”: the difference between the *value for a person* and the *personal-neutral value*<sup>28</sup>.

What value, that is, to assign to the other?

In the first case, *value for a person*, as the expression itself suggests, the experience of the other would be lived by the observer as the matching of the value in itself to the other like an agent; in other words, a utilitarian explanation of the You would not be initiated, but respect for the psycho-physical integrity of the possible victim, since moral value in itself. One could recall the Kantian categorical imperative according to which

*Act in order to treat humanity, both in your person and in each other's, always as an end and never simply as a means*<sup>29</sup>,

which, however, configures an aspect not relevant to empathy, neither to the basic one nor to the cognitive one, that is the persistence over time. The *Einfühlung*, in fact, is characterized by its “momentaneity”, not by its duration: talking about “constant empathy” means not talking about empathy, but about another phenomenon, that of sympathy.

The *personal-neutral value*, on the other hand, is the moral “non-value” that the observer “chooses” to attribute to the possible victim: the motivations for this attitude can be cultural, educational or psychological in a broad sense, but it remains the problem that in such cases *mentalizing* would fail its applicability: how to “know the other” if you do not attribute value to yourself?

Perhaps, and these considerations are the basis of nascent studies in this regard, it could be part of the explanation to be assigned to the reasons for the selfish drift or, simply, this could outline an *anomaly* of the reference paradigm<sup>30</sup> which will either be a

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. STEPHEN DARWALL, *Empathy, Sympathy, Care*, in “Philosophical Studies”, 89, 1998, pp. 261-282.

<sup>29</sup> IMMANUEL KANT, *Fondazione metafisica dei costumi*, UTET, Torino, 1995, p. 88.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. THOMAS KUHN, *La struttura delle rivoluzioni scientifiche*, Einaudi, Torino, 2009.

restructuring of the problem or a partial interpretative modification of the concept of cognitive empathy itself.

The fact is that before continuing to elucidate the further problems and new difficulties that *mentalizing* incurs, a historical-conceptual explanation from its origins is necessary.

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## Chapter II

### *Between modernity and contemporaneity*

Tracing in the History of Philosophy the author or authors who spoke of “mind reading” is somewhat complicated; the way we contemporaries understand *mentalizing* is certainly different, since it is enriched or depleted compared to a hypothetical historical *mentalizing* which is, however, dissimilar.

This must not lead those who deal with *empathy* to completely eliminate the *backward glance*, because they would commit a very serious methodological error.

As will be seen from the short path that will be outlined in the following pages, the reader will realize that the problem of giving a unanimous definition to the concept with the consequent difficulty of “freezing” the phenomenon derives precisely from the omission of this methodological step.

It is equally true that, following this arbitrariness, it could be argued that, according to the personal interpretation of those who engage in the debate, one movement, one philosopher rather than another can be privileged, consequently reaching conflicting conclusions.

The problem with this position lies in the fact that the very convictions that underlie it are the result of pressure. If it is true that the *search for knowledge* must come to *knowledge*, outlining varied topics, problems, themes that, by intertwining or opposing, reach the clarification of the problem in question, then the preliminary step to be taken in front of the singularity of an author is to understand the intentions and reasons that led him to speculate in one way rather than another.

The clarifying step is to know the intentions and the structure of the system considered globally and not to misrepresent its position. In fact, in the context of *empathy*, such an omission has been made and is still persistent in those who “interrogate” the phenomenon.



It is simple, for example, to claim that Theodor Lipps was “the theoretician of empathy”, since his work is dedicated, in fact, to this phenomenon; but the omitted aspect (that the undersigned imputes to authors who fall into that slightly more criticized attitude) is that his intent was not to “understand empathy”, but to structure an epistemology that made sense in its entirety.

When in the work *Sources of Knowledge. Empathy*<sup>31</sup>, Lipps, actually, claims that the *Einfühlung* is configured as

*‘objectification of myself in an object other than myself, regardless of whether or not what is objected deserves the name of feeling in the true sense*<sup>32</sup>

becomes emblematic of the above. If you read his writings with a more “all-embracing” and less sector-oriented perspective, you would immediately notice that the intent that moves the author, in this and in other works, is the same that moved, for example, Kant in structuring of the three *Criticisms*: giving order to the world.

An epistemological intent which is configured as a requirement, epistemically based on the “empathy tool”, to know the surrounding reality, giving it a form and a substance. It is no coincidence, in fact, that, always in the same work, Lipps writes that:

*There are three areas of knowledge. I know about things, about myself and about other selves. The first knowledge is based on sensitive perception. The second is the internal perception, eventually, the seizure of the ego, which occurs immediately or retrospectively in the memory, together with its determinations, with the experiences lived of various needs, with its activities, its acts and feelings, and at the same time with his relationships with objects. Finally, the source of the third type of knowledge is empathy*<sup>33</sup>,

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<sup>31</sup> Cfr. THEODOR LIPPS, *Una ‘scienza pura della coscienza’: l’ideale della psicologia in Theodor Lipps*, in “Discipline Filosofiche”, XIV, (2), Quodlibet, Macerata, 2002.

<sup>32</sup> *IDEM*, p. 47.

<sup>33</sup> *IVI* [Translation adapted to the English Language].

in which the latter is equated to any other cognitive tool that, of course, will provide different knowledge; but still knowledge.

In confirmation of what has already been said, we should dwell on the same definition that the German philosopher proposes of *empathy*, considering the epistemological relevance of his statements. In it, he provides two elements that constitute the key to understanding the phenomenon: on the one hand, the *objectification of myself in an object different from me*; on the other, the clarification *regardless of whether or not what is objected deserves the name of feeling in the true sense*.

Let's start from this second statement.

The German philosopher is concerned with specifying that the result of knowledge deriving from *Einfühlung* is not necessarily a sentiment, but concedes that it can also be other; which leads to have a different nature: also rational.

This can be explained, however, by following the idea that *empathy* entails the objectification of self in an object other than itself which refers the reader to the typical activity of Demiurgo who was of Platonic memory: we are then passing from a creative process transcendental psychology to the *noesis* process, incorporating the emotional realm into this substantial and practical structuring of the reality surrounding it.

In fact, how can we exclude feeling or emotion from an all-inclusive theory of knowledge and structuring of the world, of man and of the relationship between one and the other?

It is clear, that is to say, that the Lippsian intent to explain *empathy* is purely epistemological, far from any psychology of emotion that circumscribes the phenomenon to a strictly restricted area; readers / authors after Lipps who took an interest in the way we “put ourselves in the shoes of others” completely ignored, in our opinion, the original intentions of the German philosopher, fueling that conceptual confusion that still affects empathy today.

Lipps, in reality, is only one of the examples that can be proposed, using this point of view, since the problem of mentalizing begins, for us contemporaries, starting right from René Descartes.

## 2.1. Short historical *excursus*

The French philosopher is known to the general public, as well as for the distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, also for having addressed the subsequent debate on the mind / body dualism; I doubt, however, that it is identified by those who deal with *empathy* as the creator or author of the structuring of the current concept of mentalizing.

Descartes, in fact, in the *Meditations on First Philosophy*<sup>34</sup>, after having placed all its certainties in hyperbolic doubt, it is better to have only one: that of being a thing that thinks and that, at the same time, experiences, perceives and works. An ego that is the result of a thinking matter, the *res cogitans*, and of an extended matter, the *res extensa*, each of which belongs to parallel worlds with its own rules and attributes, but communicating with each other through the pineal gland.

An answer to the more general question (what nature does man have?) which hides the actual difficulty, still today, of explaining how it is possible for a man to possess a mind, a thought, a conscience and, above all, how a I, simultaneous synthesis of two *res*, is able to relate to other I's.

It would seem, at first sight, even paradoxical to consider the French philosopher as the initiator of the “cognitive empathy” problem, since Descartes himself does not lack in his works to emphasize that man, the body, is similar to a machine; how can you forget, for example, the work *World, or Treatise on Light*<sup>35</sup> or *Treatise on Man*<sup>36</sup> (only to quote the most classical example) in which the author do not hide the mechanistic vision of the nature and the human being?

And it is precisely on this apparent paradox (on the one hand the “naturalisation” of man; on the other, his “spiritual essence”) that the “paradigm” has been generated over

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<sup>34</sup> Cfr. RENATO CARTESIO, *Meditazioni Metafisiche*, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> Cfr. RENATO CARTESIO, *Il Mondo*, in EUGENIO GARIN (EDS), *Opere filosofiche. Vol. 1: Frammenti giovanili-Regole-La Ricerca della Verità-Il Mondo-L'Uomo-Discorso sul Metodo*, Edizioni Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Cfr. RENATO CARTESIO, *Risposte alle Quarte Obbiezioni*, in ADRIANO TILGHER, FRANCESCO ADORNO (EDS), *Opere Filosofiche. Vol. 2: Meditazioni Metafisiche – Obbiezioni e risposte*, Edizioni Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2009.

the centuries, sometimes supported and at other times refuted, of the two-dimensionality of human nature, still subject to particular philosophical attention.

In this regard, as “more extremist” and “more moderate” models of the contemporary world that persist in sharing the Cartesian position, in the writer’s opinion, one cannot fail to mention the “interactionist dualism”, in the first case; the “dualism of properties”, in the second.

Proposed by John Eccles and Karl Popper<sup>37</sup>, the interactionist dualism sustain that the distinction between the two *res* takes the connotation of three ontologically distinct worlds from one another; reconsidering Plato, in fact, Popper claims that the human mind can only discover the intrinsic properties of nature and not inventing them *ex novo*. Mathematical entities, for example, must be thought of as *logoi* or *analoghiai* as relations and relations of pure forms of objects, which would make the existence of Ideas more evident (the unique, eternal and immutable “forms” of reality, unique real object of knowledge, which, in Popper, translate into the “objects of knowledge” of the World 3), which, in addition to having an ontological existence distinct from their users, can only exist in relation to the minds that discover them.

Without going into a detailed analysis of the proposed theory, it could be argued that in the position of the two authors there is a transliteration of the ontological dualism of Cartesian memory to the entire phenomenal world, in which, unlike Descartes, the ontological separation allows a interaction between the parties.

Another way, in contemporary times, to translate the dualism of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* into a “more moderate” form is identifiable, symbolically, in Thomas Nagel; who, in the essay *What is it like to be a bat?*<sup>38</sup>, he claims that mind and brain (in the Cartesian vocabulary, thoughts *v/s* material) are ontologically the same substance, but, gnoseologically different; implying, as a consequence, that mental processes cannot be described in neurobiological terms.

The starting point of the American philosopher focuses on the question of understanding how one could ever “translate” the first-person experience into natural

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<sup>37</sup> Cfr. JOHN ECCLES E KARL POPPER, *The Self and Its Brain*, Springer, Berlin, 1977.

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. THOMAS NAGEL, *What is it like to be a bat?*, in “The Philosophical Review”, 1974, 83 (4), pp. 435-450.

terms; it would be impossible, for example, to explain *what it is like to be a bat*<sup>39</sup>, because, either from a neurophysiological and perceptive point of view (structural) it remains a mystery, for the human being, to explain what it would mean to live like a bat or to be a bat.

The relevant aspect, then, becomes the physical and scientific inability to “reduce” or “combine” the “qualitative” or conscious aspect of the mind with a neural substrate, capable of translating the constitutive ego of *personal* experience into synapses of the individual himself. In this sense, therefore, Nagel can be defined as a dualist, even if his *weltanschauung* would seem to extend towards a “neutral monism”, highlighting the immanent character in the natural order<sup>40</sup>: the *cogito*, as in Descartes, cannot be explained through mechanistic mechanisms or (in modern terms) neurobiological; unlike Descartes, it is not placed in an ontologically distinct sphere from the body, but as a cognitive process distinct from that used in the study of nature.

What about empathy?

The concept of empathy was not excluded from the analysis, but, however “hidden”, has its origin precisely in this philosophical problem, originated (for the contemporary) by the French philosopher in which the two *res* become an integral part of the context epistemological: now between the agent and the world now between agents. And it is precisely from this conceptual background that we must start to understand what *mentalizing* is.

If Descartes provides the *starting point* for the next discussion, in this historical *excursus* another piece is represented by David Hume, who had the merit of starting an all-inclusive analysis of what will become empathy, starting precisely from the need to structure an ethics whose foundation was based precisely on *sympathy*.

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<sup>39</sup> *IBIDEM.*

<sup>40</sup> THOMAS NAGEL, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*, Italian translation THOMAS NAGEL, *Mente e cosmo. Perché la concezione neodarwiniana della natura è quasi certamente falsa*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano, 2015.

In the *Treatise of Human Nature*<sup>41</sup> can be highlighted that the Scottish philosopher intends with this term *the mutual action of things between them or their ability to influence each other*<sup>42</sup>, specifying, indeed, that

[...] *Our affections depend on ourselves and on the internal operations of the mind more than any other impression; and for this reason they arise in the most natural way from the imagination and every lively idea that we form. This is the nature and cause of sympathy; and it is in this way that we manage to enter so deeply into the opinions and affections of others every time we discover them*<sup>43</sup>.

It is no coincidence that Hume underlines that *sympathy* represents the internal principle of the passions through which the passage from ideas to impressions would materialize: an epistemological tool that would allow the agent not only to join a social group, but to know oneself, others from oneself and the world as such.

In this perspective, we also understand the reasons why in Hume's philosophy we speak of the *ethics of sympathy*:

*It is clear that when we feel sympathy for the passions and feelings of others, these motions of the soul initially appear in our mind as mere ideas, and are thought of as belonging to another person, not unlike how we conceive any other fact. It is also evident that the ideas of the affections of others are converted into the impressions they represent and that the passions arise in accordance with the images that we form[...]*<sup>44</sup>;

since the very nature of *sympathy* is akin to that of the intellect: principle of cause and effect, principle of contiguity, principle of similarity.

It is interesting to note that Hume himself maintains that a further analysis of the principle of *sympathy* is not necessary, since it is an evident fact that it is universally

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<sup>41</sup> Cfr. DAVID HUME, *Trattato sulla Natura Umana*, Editori Laterza, Roma- Bari, 2004.

<sup>42</sup> NICOLA ABBAGNANO, *Dizionario di Filosofia*, Utet Libreria, Milano, 2006, lemma "simpatia".

<sup>43</sup> DAVID HUME, *Trattato sulla Natura Umana*, op. cit., pp. 334-335.

<sup>44</sup> *IDEM*, p. 335.

present in human nature and it is equally evident that it is the foundation of morality; if in the *Treatise* Hume maintains what has been said so far, it is equally true that in *An enquiry concerning the principles of moral*<sup>45</sup>, the natural sympathy becomes natural benevolence, claiming that

*But I forgey, that it is not my present business to recommend generosity and benevolence, or to paint, in their true colours, all the genuine charms of the social virtues. These, indeed, sufficiency engage every heart, on the first apprehension of them; and it is difficult to abstain from some sally of panegyric, as often as they occur in discourse of reasoning. But our object here being more the speculative, than practical part of morals, it will suffice to remark (what wil readily, I believe, be allowed), that no qualities are more intitled to the general good-will and approbation of mankind than benevolence and humanity, friendship and gratitude, natural affection and public spirit, or whatever proceeds from a tender sympathy with others, and a generous concern for our kind and species. These, wherever they appear, seem to transfuse themselves, in a manner, into each beholder, and to call forth, in their own behalf, the same favourable and affectionate sentiments, which they exert on all around*<sup>46</sup>.

Qualities possessed by every human being, since they result from the union between feeling and reason:

*this sentiment can be no other than a feeling for the happiness of mankind, and a resentment if their misery; since these are the different ends which virtue and vice have a tendency to promote. Here, therefore, reason instructs us in the several tendencies of actions, and humanity makes a distinction in favour of those which are useful and beneficial*<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> Cfr. DAVID HUME, *Ricerca sui principi della morale*, Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> *IBIDEM*, pp. 16-18.

<sup>47</sup> *IBIDEM*, p. 190.

In line with what has been stated above, Hume's words clearly show that when the philosopher approached the identification of moral principles in the eighteenth century, inextricably combining the *ratio* of feeling and that of the intellect, he attempted to initiate a critical examination of man as a whole in which the only concept of *sympathy*, if removed from the context, would be guilty of incomprehensibility.

We understand, then, the reasons why in the contemporary Hume is counted among the "philosophers of empathy"; on the one hand, it is a fact that he spoke of it as a characterising element of human nature in universal terms (this could, today, have an assonance with those who identify precisely in Hume a precursor of the concept); on the other, it is equally true that eliminating the epistemic nature of humeana sympathy/benevolence in order to understand it or interpret only its aspect linked to intersubjectivity is a historical, interpretative and methodological error.

This would mean considering the author "only half", which half, extrapolated from the original intent, would be the cause of misunderstandings.

The same mistake was made on another "empathy theorist", Adam Smith; which had as its purpose not the study of intersubjectivity alone, but the identification of the general principles of ethics and law. In this sense, then, the work *Theory of moral sentiments*<sup>48</sup> must be read, in which the Scottish philosopher does not fail to clarify that his analysis, taking inspiration from the approach of Hutcheson's society and detaching himself from the conclusions that Hume had reached, aims at a more global and less sectorialised vision of the principle of sympathy. The latter, in fact, in the Smithian approach, no longer presents itself as a neutral principle on which either passions or beliefs can find a gnoseological structure for moral action, but becomes

*a complex imaginative process, not without its own emotional content [...] So according to Smith, sympathy no longer has as its exclusive object a particular perception already given and to be recognised, but rather a situation considered as a whole*<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> Cfr. ADAM SMITH, *Teoria dei Sentimenti Morali*, BUR Rizzoli, Milano, 2016.

<sup>49</sup> EUGENIO LECALDANO, *Introduzione* in ADAM SMITH, *Teoria dei Sentimenti Morali*, op. cit., p. 26.



In Smith, the intersubjectivity, a pretext for the study of the principles of morality, has a marginal importance, since the relevant aspect becomes, for the debate that subsequently developed on empathy, the role that imagination has in sympathy; an aspect which, at present, in the debate has been almost completely put aside.

I would like to dwell on this statement for a clarification.

Smith reiterates that the imagination is the architect of the great discoveries in astronomy and philosophy, going well beyond the narrow perceptual fields to which Hume had relegated her; in this sense, then, the latter is the one thanks to whom the doubts of thought manage to clear up, since from surprise and wonder it manages to provide a rational explanation for the events themselves.

Upon careful analysis, Smith's words capture two aspects useful for the discussion of the subsequent debate on empathy; the first is, of course, the general architecture of the imagination; the second, the role it plays.

In the current "conversation" on *mindreading*, as already mentioned, the role of the imagination is the great absence, as the aspects that are most investigated are or those related to the neuro-biological mechanisms (and therefore it falls within the scope of the basic empathy) or, directly, to the cognitive effort typical of mentalizing; what this "cognitive effort" is, however, remains doubtful.

The other aspect that emerges is the actual role of the imagination; in Smith it would seem to have a cognitive task while in the current debate it would seem to translate into an epistemically relevant role, recognised, however, by reading the mind. It is no coincidence, in fact, that one of the central nodes of *mentalizing* is that of explaining how it is possible to know the other in epistemic terms, so much so that, comparing the role of imagination in Smith and the role of *mindreading*, today, it seems to basically grasp the same intentions even if structured in different ways.

This aspect is not of secondary importance, because - as will be seen in the following pages - the problem of giving transcendental justification to *mentalizing* has become an urgency in the light of the different cultural strands that support the naturalization of the mental and human being.

If, then, Hume and Smith, maybe unconsciously, influenced their subsequent debate on empathy in the ways and in the manners seen, an author almost contemporary with Scottish philosophers who was, over time, taken up for part of his theory was Friedrich Schleiermacher.

In the work *Aesthetica*<sup>50</sup> the German philosopher, following the footsteps of Idealism, maintained that Art did not present itself as an immediate expression of a feeling, but as a theoretical activity of the artist who, taking inspiration from the immediacy of the pathos, used the latter as a means of give harmony, order, shape to the artist's passionate agitation. It is not a hypothetical relationship between a work of art and a user in the sense of empathic communication, as we would say today, but of the Spinozian identity between substance and form.

The understanding by the user of the work does not present itself as an analysis of a feeling (“empathic”), born in the user himself following the vision of the work itself; there is no “inwardly reliving the feeling that the artist has transferred to canvas”, since the immediacy of the feeling itself is missing. This relationship, however, is presented as a theoretical activity that the user experiences in the vision of Art in general.

From the words of Benedetto Croce:

*However, all these oscillations do not detract from the fact that Schleiermacher well circumscribed the field of aesthetics as that of a knowing which is not yet logical knowing. To better determine such a form of knowing, he starts from the ‘immediate self-consciousness’, which, according to what he expressly warns, is not already the consciousness of the self or self-consciousness, which is thought and thinks constancy in the diversity of moments but it is instead the ‘diversity of the moments’, in other words, it is life itself in the throbbing of living it, an incessant event of pleasure and pain.*

*Does art consist in this immediacy of conscience, in the beat of life, in the outpouring of feeling? Schleiermacher is careful not to identify art with pathos or with sentiment,*

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<sup>50</sup> Cfr. FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER, *Estetica, Aesthetica*, Palermo, 1988.

which is the solution to which even in our days rough inartistic spirits are willingly applied; but, at the same time, he realises that, without life lived, without the pathos of life, art would lack its own material. Art was born with giving shape to this matter (or, which is the same, with giving theoretical shape to what previously had a passionate and practical form) [...] <sup>51</sup>

Schleiermacher's *Aesthetics*, in addition to being a further example of a partial reading of his work, also represents the turning point for the drafting of that red thread that should bring the concept of *mentalizing* from modern to contemporary.

If with the *ethics of sympathy* the emphasis was placed on the inter-relational aspect of sentiment, Schleiermacher added to this reconstruction the purely emotional aspect experienced by a hypothetical agent able, at this point, to justify expressions of the type "put yourself in someone else's shoes", "relive an emotion in yourself" and the like. The problem in the problem, then, is configured in the fact that if *Aesthetics* represents a turning point for what has been said, in our opinion it becomes emblematic for another reason.

In fact, when the author speaks of the "theoretical construction of truth" on canvas, he is bringing out what Descartes had already outlined: the simultaneity of the two *res*.

On the one hand, in fact, there is the artist's *cogito* who, through the *res extensa* (the body of the same) paints on canvas; on the other, the work of art, which has become the objectification of the artist's *res cogitans*) joins the canvas, becoming, in turn, *res extensa*.

An indissoluble union that configures the existence, in Art, of the ontological dualism already identified by Descartes to confirm how much the *Meditations on First Philosophy* in the discussion related to *mentalizing* have, unconsciously, influenced the history of his concept.

It is obvious that Schleiermacher's interpretation is valid in light of a particular vision of *mindreading* and that this does not influence or affect the true reconstruction of the

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<sup>51</sup> BENEDETTO CROCE, *L'Estetica di Federico Schleiermacher*, in "La Critica. Rivista di Letteratura, Storia e Filosofia diretta da Benedetto Croce", 35, 1935, p. 117.

concept of Art in his Philosophy; as mentioned, it is greatly affected by Spinoza's thought and Idealism, of which he is one of the greatest exponents together with Fichte, Schelling and Hegel.

If what has been briefly described so far has been the result of specific needs that arose gradually from an increasingly complex structuring of continental philosophical thought during the twentieth century, contrary to what most people claim, those same needs will reappear "overseas", outlining the current debate on *mindreading*.

## 2.2. *Mentalizing in the analytic tradition*

When Carl G. Hempel wrote:

*The historian, who asserts himself, imagines himself in the place of the people involved in the events he intends to explain, trying to fully understand the circumstances in which they acted and the reasons that influenced their actions; and through this imaginary self-identification with his heroes he comes to understand and thus adequately explain the events in which he is interested*<sup>52</sup>

he certainly did not have in mind the veracity of the equation

Empathy=Knowledge.

Hempel's empathy, in reality, is configured as mere heuristic, psychological hypotheses, lacking the essential requirements for an understanding proper; we are far from what in the "Continent" was meant by *empathy*, following the positions of authors such as Collingwood, Gadamer or Husserl himself.

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<sup>52</sup> CARL G. HEMPEL, *The Function of General Laws in History*, in CARL G. HEMPEL, *Aspects of Scientific Eplanation and Other Essays in the Philosophy of Science*, Free Press, New York, 1965, p. 239.

With the concept of *re-enactment*, for example, Collingwood himself claimed that “reliving the experience” of the great characters of history meant retracing, for the historian, that set of decisions, emotions, situations that would lead the agent to make one action rather than another. We are far from any philosophy of history that has as its object the moral problem of choice, of free will, but becomes, in the wake of what Lipps has already argued and of what the tradition of a certain “textual matrix” he was concerned with a sort of hermeneutic interpretation of the relationship between text and reader.

Collingwood, unlike Schleiermacher (only to remain in the context of authors already met) cannot be counted among the “theorists of empathy” who contributed to the formation, piece by piece, of the current concept of *mentalizing*, since the real issue of the elaboration in which the other can be understood by himself does not come from the continental philosophical tradition, but “overseas”, from the analytical one.

If, in fact, in the “old Europe” the “mind problem” continued to be considered as inscribed in a hermeneutic circle, linked to the problem of the meaning and meaning of the expressions or behaviors of the individual (because considered the most appropriate way to provide tools necessary for the understanding of all sciences), this trend changed in the panorama of analytical philosophy; which (by its very less “transcendent” and more “transcendental” constitution) began to ask itself the question of how it was possible for one agent to understand the other.

First in terms of “other people’s mind”, then in those of “other people’s states and volitions”.

The author of the recovery from the continental *débâcle* of the concept of *empathy* in analytic philosophy was, in the opinion of the writer, Willard Van Orman Quine, who attributed to the latter an epistemological role of no small importance in his philosophy. Retrospectively analyzing the famous “radical translation” experiment (the *Gedankenesperiment*), proposed in his most famous work, *Word and Object*<sup>53</sup>, Quine

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<sup>53</sup> Cfr. WILLARD VAN ORMAN QUINE, *Word and Object*, The MIT Press (New Edition), Massachusetts, 2013.

himself sustains that what guided him in the writing was the epistemological problem, so much to stating that

[...] *it is the epistemological interest, and not my incidental interest in linguistics, which motivates my speculation on radical translation*<sup>54</sup>,

where the term “epistemological” is used to mean the “theory of knowledge” or “relative to knowledge”.

Therefore, the context within which the *Gedankenexperiment* should be placed is that of a “naturalised epistemology”, in which the problems on language raised by Quine act as a corollary to the main intent; it is no coincidence that, according to critics, *Word and Object* opens the reflections about themes of research that will later flow into the contexts of the ontology of mathematics, the theory of meaning and learning, logic, the same philosophy and theory of knowledge, related, above all to the contributions that Quine himself provided to the theory of rationality and intentional attribution. The latter, in fact, act as connecting elements between the naturalised epistemology and the interpretation of the behavior of others:

*If the problems concerning the ‘knowledge of the other’ are also understood in the epistemological investigation, they have significant consequences for the traditional theme, discussed in the context of action theory, of the identification of intentional states in whose terms they are usually explained Actions. It is in relation to [these, n.d.r.] points [...] that the notion of empathy plays a central role, although in the epistemic limits that Quine theory places on intentional attribution - limits deriving from the behavioral approach in ‘third person’, of linguistic conception of intentionality and the thesis of underdetermination of intentional states with respect to manifest behavior*<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup> WILLARD VAN ORMAN QUINE, *Three Indeterminacies*, in ROBERT B. BARRETT E ROGER F. GIBSON (EDS), *Perspectives on Quine*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, p. 3.

<sup>55</sup> ANTONIO RAINONE, *La riscoperta dell’empatia. Attribuzioni intenzionali e comprensione nella filosofia analitica*, Bibliopolis, Napoli, 2005, p. 75.

Despite the above limitations, Quine in the decades following the drafting of *Word and Object* will not fail to return to the concept “empathy”, underlining the empirical legitimacy of the phenomenon capable of guaranteeing a certain effectiveness in intentional attributions to the other; however, according to what common sense psychology is known about the context in which the other works, acts, perceives.

In particular, in the famous experiment of “radical translation”, Quine puts the case of a linguist in the grips of understanding and, therefore, translating the term *gavagai*, enunciated by the native; if at first the observation of the native’s verbal and non-verbal behavior allows the linguist to draw up a list of the verbal issues pronounced by the same, it will only be at a later stage that the linguist will be able to register the identity of *gavagai* with that of “rabbit”.

The point of the Quinean argumentation, object here of particular interest, is that this comparison or identity must be sought in the external aspects of communication, in the similarity of the behaviour implemented by the native<sup>56</sup>.

In this context, in addition to the practice put in place by the linguist, the observation of behavior will also be added to that of empathy:

*The linguist notes the native’s profusion of ‘Gavagai’ in cases where he himself, in the native’s position, may have said ‘Rabbit’. So he tries to say ‘Gavagai’ on the occasions when he would be pushed to say ‘Rabbit’, and awaits the approval of the natives. Encouraged, temporarily adopt ‘Rabbit’ as a translation. Empathy dominates language learning, both in the case of the child and in the case of the linguist in the field. In the case of the child, it is the parent’s empathy. This assesses the appropriateness of the child’s observational statement considering its orientation and how the scene would appear from his point of view. In the other case it is the empathy of the linguist who works in the field when he advances his first conjecture on ‘Gavagai’ on the basis of the profusion and orientation of the native, and again when he asks ‘Gavagai’, on a subsequent occasion which seems favorable to him, to obtain*

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<sup>56</sup> Cfr. WILLARD VAN ORMAN QUINE, *Pursuit of Truth* (Revised Edition), Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts), 1992.

*the consent of the native. We all have an extraordinary ability to empathise the perceptual situation of another person, even though they are unaware of the physiological or optical mechanisms of his perception*<sup>57</sup>.

It is clear, then, how an affinity between the linguist and the native must be implicit so as to make it possible for the former to understand the attitudes, thoughts and desires of the latter, initiating an empathic understanding; an imaginary situation, we could say, in which the linguist is able to “put himself in the place of the other” to understand the way the world would appear in the eyes of the You, rather than on his own.

Empathy would seem to acquire the implicit status of a “work tool” in which the problem of intersubjectivity, manifest in the hypothetical situation of radical translation, would find a solution: a completely naturalised tool that, between manifest behavior and “external aspects of communication”, would allow, however, the native to *understand* that *gavagai* means “rabbit”. An understanding of the other “in first person”, I would say, that would allow the linguist to make a leap forward from the mere “finding”, coming to guide

*the linguist also when he relieves himself from the utterances of observation through his analytical hypotheses, although here he does [the linguist, n.d.r.] try to project himself in the associations and in the grammatical trends of the native rather than in his perceptions*<sup>58</sup>.

Regardless of the subsequent developments that Quine’s philosophy will take from the drafting of *Word and Object*, a relevant aspect that emerges from the discussion is that the recovery of the concept of empathy by the American philosopher begins to place itself in a different way than tradition; it is not a matter of identifying a “natural benevolence” to Hume or of transposing the artist’s *res cogitans* on canvas in relation

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<sup>57</sup> WILLARD VAN ORMAN QUINE, *Three Indeterminacies*, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> WILLARD VAN ORMAN QUINE, *Pursuit of Truth*, op. cit, p. 43.



to aesthetic use, nor is it an instrument capable of “shaping the surrounding reality” as in Lipps, but becomes a “material” explanation of intersubjectivity.

We begin to pose the problem of how it is possible for an agent to understand the other from himself, however, removing any kind of recourse to the *res* of Cartesian memory and trying to appeal to an experimental method, verifiable through experience, which, on the one hand, could be affected by the influence of Logical Neopositivism, on the other, wanted to detach it.

The Fifties until the Eighties of the Twentieth Century represent, in the opinion of the writer, precisely this passage.

Already from Quine himself it can be argued that we begin to move away from the nomological-deductive model of Hempel and Oppenheim, introducing not only what has been said about empathy, but also the notion of *simplicity*:

*It is not surprising that anyone who advances a theory is looking for simplicity. When two theories are equally sustainable in certain aspects, the simpler of the two must certainly be preferred for reasons of both beauty and convenience. But what is noteworthy is that the simpler of the two is generally considered not only as the most desirable, but also as the most probable. If the two theories conform equally to past observations, the simplest one is considered to have the best chance of confirmation in future observations*<sup>59</sup>.

In the tradition inaugurated by Hempel and Oppenheim<sup>60</sup>, in fact, the *ratio* of the model was to clarify the nature of the scientific explanation through what the two authors called “laws of cover”: the *explanans*, the premises of the scientific syllogism, contained in itself the law or the explanation of what should have been explain, the plan, so that the second could be deduced from the first.

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<sup>59</sup> WILLARD VAN ORMAN QUINE, *On Simple Theories of a Complex World*, in WILLARD VAN ORMAN QUINE, *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays* (Revised and Enlarged Edition), Harvard University Press. Cambridge (Massachusetts), 1976, p. 255.

<sup>60</sup> CARL HEMPEL E PAUL OPPENHEIM, *Studies in the Logic of Explanation*, in “Philosophy of Science”, 15, 1948, pp. 135-175.

The use of the experimental method was supported by the fact that in the same premises there were contained both the general laws of the phenomenon to be explained and the empirical content, so that, deductively, the knowledge obtained could be verified.

Since the Seventies, the rational reconstructions of the Hempelian method were the subject of numerous criticisms due above all to the nature of the model: how, in fact, could a new knowledge have been obtained from an explanation of the phenomenon provided with the deduction? How, again, can we explain the irrational-emotional aspect of human nature?

These and other questions were the basis of his progressive abandonment, since the explanations provided by him often sounded unrealistic or inapplicable to all areas of knowledge; in this context, interest in the empathic phenomenon seemed to give legitimacy and respectability to the psychological explanations of the Human Sciences, simultaneously providing an alternative path to Logical Neo-positivism.

Quine's further contribution to the contemporary and subsequent debate falls within this context.

When the American philosopher spoke of *simplicity* with a meaning that, according to critics, is conjugable in terms of *likely*, *plausible*, *believable*, in the writer's opinion he took up what was already supported by William of Ockham between the Thirteenth and Fourteenth centuries: *pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate*.

In other words, faced with two or more theories that can explain the phenomenon, it is preferable to opt for the simpler and more linear one, because it is more plausible from a scientific point of view<sup>61</sup>.

In this vein, Hilary Putnam, although she has never dealt with the concept of empathy in depth, takes up what Quine has argued, arguing that the notions of simplicity or plausibility serve to identify epistemic criteria for the rational acceptance of scientific hypotheses of the choice that *a priori* is better able to explain part of the world. In this procedure fielded by the agent, empathy is the keystone: Putnam, although aware that

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<sup>61</sup> Cfr. NELSON GOODMAN, *Problems and Projects*, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Indianapolis and New York, 1972.

*Verstehen* is not based on scientifically rigorous methods for acquiring new knowledge, recognises a certain *plausibility / probability* intuitive:

[empathy, in fact, n.d.r.] *is the source of likelihood a priori in many judgements in general about people*<sup>62</sup>.

It is not a cognitive tool like any experimental method, but an innate ability that can provide “correct opinions” in the wake of a set of “common knowledge” that cannot be formalised; *Verstehen* ranks as an “intuitive method” capable of practically explaining the other or a situation on the basis of a psychology shared unanimously by agents in that context capable of “saying something” about the world or others.

Putnam does not go further in the search for an epistemic legitimacy to be associated with empathy as it leaves the problem of intuitive “controls *a priori*” that the agent would be able to implement when he would relate to the world or to the other in empathic terms.

The peculiar aspect of Putnam’s discussion is another.

Two important aspects are beginning to emerge:

- the hypothesis that empathy can provide knowledge;
- the hypothesis that the latter, although an indefinite form of innate ability, is able to act only against the background of a set of commonly shared knowledge: *folk psychology*.

We are, therefore, progressively moving towards the introduction of an element far from both the ontology of reality and the strictly moral discourse, since an alternative route to Hempel’s is emerging: no longer a scientific explanation guaranteed by the laws of coverage, but the introduction of an irrational, emotional element such as

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<sup>62</sup> HILARY PUTNAM, *Meaning and the moral Science*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, Londra, 1978, p. 75.

empathy to structure a plausible scientific explanation in relation to “what is said, done, known”, Heidegger would have said.

The will is to connaturate the nature of scientific explanation to mankind and only to what is human, removing any element that is not attributable to his own abilities.

With contemporary terms, one could say that a *naturalisation of knowledge* was beginning and empathy provided the connecting element.

A further piece to add to the path that led to mentalizing was provided by Robert Nozick, who legitimises the epistemic use of empathy on the basis of two arguments: the first, on the empirical plausibility of the “correct opinions” provided by it, taking up again Putnam; the second on *Verstehen*’s epistemic status.

It seems that the step forward made by the American philosopher was to assimilate the method of empathic understanding to the scientific one by means of reasoning by analogy; indeed,

[il *Verstehen*, n.d.r.] is a particular form of inference by analogy, where I am the thing the other is analogous to. Through him, it is inferred that the other behaves as I would behave in that situation, a situation that is partially specified subjectively - from a particular point of view<sup>63</sup>.

The method of empathy would not, then, be configured as a simple imaginative act of “putting yourself in the other’s shoes”, but as an analogical reasoning in which the observer would use himself as a model for explaining the other by himself; we are witnessing a transposition of the original intent.

*Empathy* is no longer used as an instrument of “creation of the world”, but as an instrument capable of providing scientific knowledge thanks to the way it operates; in this sense, then, the observer who empathises with the victim would be able to:

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<sup>63</sup> ROBERT NOZICK, *Philosophical Explanation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981, p. 637.

- have access to himself, through an introspective act, understanding himself as a model of comparison;
- with an imaginative act of “putting yourself in the other’s shoes”;
- comparing yourself and the other by analogy;
- knowing the differences;
- getting knowledge about the other.

There is, willingly or unwillingly, from Nozick, the theoretical explanation of what *mentalizing* is currently with different forms and modalities, but, substantially, the discourse remains the same.

Returning to the American philosopher, the intent of his speculation does not lie in the concept of empathy and will, as everyone is well known, take other paths; the relevant point, then, lies in the fact that although we do not return to the *Verstehen* of Lippsian memory we are witnessing a kind of “conjunction of intents”.

Although in different ways, attempts are made to restore empathy as a cognitive tool; in continental tradition it was associated with a “mental” capacity, in the analytic one with an “innate” capacity. But the divergent aspect remains.

The empathy of “old Europe” was associated with or was the material advance of an “immaterial” aspect of the human that Descartes had called *res cogitans*; in the “new continent”, it becomes an *escamotage* to refute the tradition of logical neo-positivism, attempting to confer legitimacy and theoreticality on empathy itself.

Having reached the point of having recognised an epistemic statute, the question arose of how it could practically act in the knowledge of the other; since, you can remember, by refusing the analytic tradition any recourse to dualism, a common, human way had to be sought for empathic explanation.

The solution to the problem was provided by Wilfrid Sellars, who gave theoreticality to *Folk Psychology*<sup>64</sup>: that set of knowledge shared in the same context became the theoretical / conceptual background within which empathy, defined as innate ability,

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<sup>64</sup> Cfr. WILFRID SELLARS, *Science, Perception and Reality*, Humanities Press, New York, 1963.

could understand, explain, know the other from himself, before; the other's mind afterwards.

Empathy depleted of its substantial content typical of the way in which Continental Philosophy had considered it (the thinking thought), now becomes a *naturalised* means of response to the Cartesian dualism ("innate ability") that acts and operates not for use of the *cogito*, but of what is known about the world. *Folk Psychology*, therefore, becomes not only the scientific justification for the use of empathy, but also the "material" response to both the *res* and the nature of the scientific explanation.

The latter is intentionally opposed to the Cartesian dualism which can be seen directly from the words of Sellars, who, starting from the refutation of *The Myth of the Given*, comes to the question of how the mind can be constituted<sup>65</sup>. Sellars, in the wake of the work of Rudolf Carnap, is concerned with giving legitimacy to the foundations of empirical knowledge and in the years in which the American philosopher operates, two major strands of research can be traced: on the one hand, the priority of a purely empirical matrix; on the other, of logical-linguistic matrix to which Sellars himself feels closer.

Starting, then, from the problem of meaning, Sellars comes to ask himself what is the nature of the mind and in particular what is, if it exists, the content of mental life; the American philosopher, denying any "first person" perspective, therefore the truthfulness and epistemological status of any introspective act, completely rejects the idea of a *cogito* distinct from the body, trying to solve the problem of understanding the intentions of others in different way.

The intentional attributions of one agent to another were not based on the appeal by analogy, hypothesised by Nozick, but through a purely behaviorist understanding of the action. Wanting to make a comparison, we take back what Quine had already hypothesized in the radical experiment on the behavior of the linguist for the understanding of the term *gavagai* put in place by the native; the difference, however, lies in the fact that in this context the use of the empathy phenomenon is completely

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<sup>65</sup> Cfr. WILFRID SELLARS, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Harvard University Press, Harvard, 1997.

absent. In fact, Sellars uses the fantastic story of the *Myth of Jones* to explain intersubjectivity. The terrestrial scientist Jones, rejecting any “mentalist language”, hypothesises that where a Martian should come into contact with him, both would be able to understand each other; starting from different environments, culture, customs and languages, an understanding of the common sense psychology that constitutes the environment of origin would be sufficient to assign a given belief to a given behavior. In this way, in addition to “solving” the problem of the mental, the American philosopher gave an answer to the way in which intersubjectivity was possible: not through the use of any innate capacity (empathy), but through that whole of beliefs and volitions that constitute the “common knowledge” of a given context, thus attempting to open a further debate on the epistemic status of intentional attributions as if they were the building blocks of a new theory of mind.

The use of empathy begins to move away from the background, but the Cartesian problem remains: what nature does man have?

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## Capitolo III

### *From Folk Psychology to Metacognition*

Since the 1950s, the concept of Folk Psychology has undergone significant changes and differentiations, which have concerned, first of all, the problem relating to the nature of the mental; it is no coincidence that between behaviourists, cognitivists or eliminativists (just to mention the most well-known currents) there have been different responses to how to understand the mind, using popular psychology or as a conceptual background like a “scientific theory” or like a false theory.

It is good to remember, in this regard, what Jerry Fodor argued, that, since mental states are non-existent, any theory aspiring to explain their nature would also be non-existent<sup>66</sup>.

Within the “tangle of *folk psychology*” we began to feel the need to identify an instrument that was able to ensure that two or more agents could relate to each other and, following this need, we began to talk about *mindreading* / *mentalizing* to indicate the attribution of propositional / mental states to the other by oneself. In other words, a tool capable of explaining intersubjectivity and, above all, understanding the intentions and behavior of others.

In a context, therefore, relating only to the intentional attribution the large absent or, if you wish, the missing conjunction element was the way in which to truthfully attribute the intentions to the other by himself. Thus, the problem arose of providing an explanation to the “methodology” of *mentalizing*, made even more urgent by the further need not to fall into Cartesian dualism; where, in fact, any “non-material” element was rejected to give an account of the true or presumed truthfulness of thoughts, beliefs and volitions to the other to explain social behaviour, consistency claimed that this ability was also purely “empirical”, far from any transcendence.

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<sup>66</sup> Cfr. JERRY FODOR, *Modularity of Mind: Essay on Faculty Psychology*, Bradford Book, Massachusetts, 1983.



The *punctum dolens*, that is to say, came back strongly to attention: what nature does man have? And, declined in this context, how is it possible for an agent to talk / relate to another agent?

Solving the problem by taking up the concept of *monade* in both Leibnitz and Husserl's meaning would have meant the failure of an entire cultural tradition which, out of the need to oppose Logical Neo-positivism (to retrace, albeit briefly, the red thread so far track), had turned his reflective efforts elsewhere.

If, then, in the span of twenty years (the fifties and seventies) the conditions for abandoning that model and opposing dualism had been formed, there was now no "only" explanation of how the mind could be read.

Of course, piece by piece, Quine, Putnam or Nozick (just to cite authors already met) had started a process of "corrosion" of the old theoretical paradigm, placing at the center of philosophical attention the fact that man, as such, it is also *other* than the laws of cover scientifically deduced from a phenomenon or vice versa; they began to unhinge a way deemed unsuitable to "do philosophy", looking for a credible model of epistemic justification for its nature. What Aristotle already argued returned to attention: man as a *rational animal*; in which the removal from the latter either from the "animal" sphere (here understood in terms of emotionality in the broad sense) or from the rational sphere would mean a "halfway" methodological operation.

In this context, then, the use of the term empathy has returned to attention, but this has not meant starting an analytical study on its nature, but "simply" using it as a "tool". The consequent debate will then develop by determining two great theoretical paradigms, *Theory-Theory* (TT) and *Simulation Theory* (ST), which will differ (at least in the first few decades) in the way they understand the ability of *mindreading* and *Folk Psychology*.

In this regard, before going into the equally controversial world of the two theoretical positions, it is good to dwell on some clarifications concerning the "elements of discord" just mentioned. When it is talked about, usually, of *mindreading*, it can be matched, immediately, the expression to:

- predicting the behaviour of others;
- attribution to the other of beliefs, desires and intentions;
- explanation of manifest behaviour in relation to the corresponding mental state<sup>67</sup>;

if this represents “phenomenologically” (please allow me the expression) the activity of *mentalizing*, there is no doubt that this ability “goes further”; also, we must add the ability to explain to ourselves and understand, therefore, most of the mental states of others, not limited to that manifested by that given behaviour.

The *mindreading* activity allows those who exercise it to “enter the mind of the other”, trying to scientifically grasp its structure not from a neuro-biological point of view, but psychological in a broad sense: the personality, the character, temperament ... his Self. In this way, this activity would make manifest what takes time to be acquired: the knowledge of the other.

Therefore, the purely “cognitive” one must be added to the first phenomenological stage, which allows those who exercise it to initiate the effort already mentioned about Hoffman that characterizes the activity of mindreading.

As can be seen, the expression empathy has so far been left aside as proof of the fact that the cultural operation carried out in the twenty years in question has not had the purpose of analysing this particular and multifaceted phenomenon of which, to date, it is not possible to give a unanimous definition.

Empathy will return to the attention of the philosophical debate only when it was realized that in order for the mentalizing activity to have its justification one would have to resort to a material tool that had legitimised its use: empathy, understood in this context as “innate ability” provided the solution.

Its nature has been the subject of considerable controversy, which have channeled the debate, towards two opposing positions: *Theory-Theory* v/s *Simulation Theory*.

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<sup>67</sup> Cfr. SHAUN NICHOLS E STEPHEN STITCH, *Folk Psychology: Simulation or Tacit Theory?*, in “Mind & Language”, Vol. 7, 1992, pp. 35-71.

Another clarification is needed for the explanation of the expression *Folk Psychology*: how to understand it? What explanation to give?

In fact, reading Karsten Stueber's words, a doubt arises:

*This means, therefore, that [folk psychology n.d.r.] should be read according to a realistic psychological meaning, as if these principles were somehow represented internally by the people competent in the psychology of common sense? Or does it simply mean that the structure of our interpretative practices of common sense psychology are made transparent in a systematic way only if they materialize in a psychological theory?*<sup>68</sup>.

Following the differentiation provided by the two American philosophers Shaun Nichols and Stephen Stich, three generic meanings can be found:

1. *Folk Psychology* in the sense of “phenomenologically” predicting the behaviour of others (the first stage of the *mentalizing* process outlined above);
2. *Folk Psychology* as a “cognitive theory” to explain the behaviour of others;
3. *Folk Psychology* as a set of all the obvious and trivialities that people are inclined to support<sup>69</sup>.

In the latter sense, think of what David Lewis said:

*Collect all the platitudes you can think of regarding the causal relations of mental states, sensory stimuli, and motor responses. Perhaps we can think of them as having the form: When someone is in so-and-so combination of mental states and receives sensory stimuli of so-and-so kind, he tends with so-and-so probability to be caused thereby to go into so-and-so mental states and produce so-and-so motor*

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<sup>68</sup> KARSTEN R. STUEBER, *L'empatia*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2010, p. 69.

<sup>69</sup> Cfr. SHAUN NICHOLS E STEPHEN STITCH, *Mindreading: An Integrated Account of Pretence, Self-Awareness and Understanding Other Minds*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003.

responses. Add also all the platitudes to the effect that one mental state falls under another--'toothache is a kind of pain', and the like. Perhaps there are platitudes of other forms as well. Include only platitudes which are common knowledge among us - everyone knows them, everyone knows that everyone else knows them, and so on. For the meanings of our words are common knowledge, and I am going to claim that names of mental states derive their meaning from these platitudes. Form the conjunction of these platitudes; or better, form a cluster of them --a disjunction of all conjunctions of most of them. (That way it will not matter if a few are wrong.) This is the postulate of our term-introducing theory<sup>70</sup>.

A meaning that, regardless of the distinctions, is used in the contexts of reference as a theoretic and theoretical background in which to place the reading ability of the mind, which interests and intersects different areas of reflection: from the Philosophy of the mind to the moral Philosophy.

### 3.1. The Theory-Theory

Within that terminological distinction on the use and meaning of *Folk Psychology*, David Lewis's words provide the emblematic explanation of what TT initially indicated: yes a set of obviousness, organised conceptually, through which to attribute beliefs and volitions to the other, but basically a particular meaning of what the mind is. The latter, in fact, is intended as a summation of concepts learned from the environment in which it is inserted (*Folk Psychology*) thanks to which one would be able to attribute beliefs and volitions to the other by himself. In this sense, then, the activity of *mindreading* is configured as a theoretical comparison between two or more common-sense psychologies, now similar now disagreeing.

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<sup>70</sup> DAVID LEWIS, *Psychological and theoretical identification*, in "Australian Journal of Philosophy", n. 50, 1972, p. 256.

In the first case, the intentional attribution from one mind to another will be supported by the same obviousness learned by both protagonists in the same environment; in the second, on the other hand, the explanation of the other (*mentalizing*) is presented as an encounter between different “concepts”, difficult to trace within that common psychology learned in the context in which the agent is lived. Reading the mind of others, in this second case, would result in a failure; to overcome this difficulty it will be sufficient to learn the other’s *Folk Psychology* to understand its intentions, beliefs and volitions: the *Myth of Jones* returns.

It seems incredible, in the writer’s opinion, that the mind (whatever *res* denotes it) is equated to a set of obvious, albeit conceptually organized, since it does not seem at all scientific that *doxa* can be raised to the *status* of *episteme*.

The very meaning of Philosophy, *in primis*, and of the other Sciences, *in secundis*, have the purpose of fighting rumors and common sense in order to understand “the way the world works”, removing and dispelling prejudices and false knowledge.

Accepting such a theory of the mind means, in our opinion, to abdicate the role of Thinkers, of Philosophers, betraying the same *ratio* that moved those who led Humanity to the present stage. Furthermore, one should ask oneself, beyond the doubts raised at TT, why for five hundred years, for example, hasn’t another genius like Leonardo da Vinci presented himself to the world? If the mind “would be nothing else” than the result of *Folk Psychology*, how come in a “scientific” context such as that of the 21st century, the set of conceptually organised concepts does not “create” another Leonardo?

*Ad escludendum*, therefore, it must be agreed that those who are unable to learn (either because of neuro-biological deficits or because they are not included in a pre-organised context) do not therefore possess a mind; this would mean taking a position on a specific aspect of morality: how to consider, how to relate to mindless human subjects? An aspect of the debate within the TT that is absent and one should question the reasons.

If as stated above represents, albeit briefly, the *external* position of *Theory-Theory* proposed by Lewis, some authors, not sharing this hypothesis on the mental, have

proposed that the mind (therefore, *Folk Psychology*) is an “innate ability” that present, “cognitively”, with the progressive development of the psycho-intellectual abilities of the human: the *Child-Scientist Theory-Theory*<sup>71</sup>, for example, in this vein, they argue that *mentalizing* acts at a deeper, more demanding level than the mere acquisition of knowledge already given, since this ability would be able to attribute beliefs and desires to the other through a cognitive effort by the agent. The latter, in fact, would be able to both elaborate general explanations on the phenomena observed and to implement the activity of *mentalizing* itself.

In this case, then, popular psychology would not only be “acquired”, but also “internalised”; an internalisation that would start, as the expression suggests, from childhood. Through the use of observation and postulation of already given concepts, it is assumed that the psycho-motor development of minors is not due to a progressive psycho-cognitive development, but to the increasingly rich acquisition of beliefs and desires of *Folk Psychology*.

Compared to Lewis’s position, the access to the beliefs and desires rendered by *Folk Psychology* as a “conceptually organised theory” changes: the reading of the mind is configured, according to the varied world of positions that follow one another in TT, as continuous learning of the child during the years of training<sup>72</sup>, being progressively able to use, in an increasingly sophisticated and complex way, the set of beliefs acquired from the reference context.

According to the TT theoreticians<sup>73</sup>, however, the child’s progressive and increasing ability to initiate the *mentalizing* process would result, using the terminology of Simon Baron-Cohen, from the functionality of the ID and SAM module, responsible for the epistemic stages of the mind. According to its position, in fact, the “reading of the mind” skills would depend on four distinct modular subsystems: the recognition of intentionality (ID, *Intentionality Detector*); recognition of the direction of the gaze

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<sup>71</sup> Cf. ALISON GOPNIK E ANDREW N. MELTZOFF, *Words, Thoughts and Theories*, Mit Press, Massachusetts, 1997.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. KEIN BARTSCH E HENRY M. WELLMAN, *Children Talk about the Mind*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. SIMON BARON-COHEN, *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory on Mind*, MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1995.

(EDD, *Eye Detection Detector*); the *Shared Attention Mechanism* (SAM); the *Theory of Mind Model*, (ToMM)<sup>74</sup>.

Beyond the interpretative differences present in the external TT, emblematic are the words of Ian M. Ravenscroft to define this position:

[The “external” concept of folk psychology is, n.d.r.] *a theory of mind implicit in our everyday talk about mental states. In the every day traffic of our lives we make remarks linking sensory experiences to mental states; mental states to other mental states; and mental states to behavior. Thus we remark that the smell of freshly baked bread made Sally feel hungry; that Sally wanted to go on diet because she thought that she was overweight; and that Sally went to the fridge because she desired a piece of chocolate cake [...]*<sup>75</sup>.

Another discussion involves the version of the *internal* TT, according to which *mentalizing* would derive from specific cognitive abilities of the agent who, combined with the conceptually organised *corpus* of popular psychology, would make intentional attribution possible: the reading the mind would be possible through an *internal* representation of the theory of mind.

It is not difficult to imagine the difficulties that this interpretation of the TT incurs: how to verify the way in which the content of a given belief is present within one’s own and others’ minds? Also because, being *Theory Theory* a theoretical proposal that completely refuses the use of dualism, it will also have to account for the way in which a “matter” can think, but, above all, how, methodologically, a set of rumors can constitute the mind.

The problem is not the naturalisation of the same, but the way in which the existent, using Heideggerian terminology, can constitute the *cogito*.

Then, we return to the initial doubts.

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<sup>74</sup> IDEM.

<sup>75</sup> Cfr. IAN M. RAVENSCROFT, *Folk Psychology as a Theory*, in “Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy”, article available online at the following address:

<https://stanford.library.sydney.edu.au/archives/spr2010/entries/folkpsych-theory/>.

Beyond the implicit differentiations in the complex world of internal TT, more in general to the *Theory Theory*, they have been forwarded doubts and refutations that have had the effect of starting a new approach of the same, causing that the virtual stakes of detachment between her and its *competitor*, the *Simulation Theory*, are no longer so well defined (to be honest, the same discourse also applies to the same TS): in what way can the mental content of the mind be represented? What is the nature of Folk Psychology? Or, again, how to account for the universality of *mindreading*? What is even more perplexing is the interpretation to be taken to denote the mind's reading ability: is it really a theoretical activity? According to simulationists, for example, the latter would be understood as a change of perspective from self to that of the other, making one's own beliefs and volitions that do not belong to one's ego, but to that of the You<sup>76</sup>; or, according to narrative theorists, this ability would be configured as the construction of a "story" to be attributed to the other, regardless of any theoretical reasoning<sup>77</sup>, giving rise to further question marks on a phenomenon that is far from a definitive solution.

### 3.2. The *Simulation Theory*

Unlike the *Theory Theory*, which bases *mindreading* skills through the use of concepts (it does not matter whether in its *internal* or *external* meaning), *Simulation Theory* would seem to grant the reading of the mind a "more valid" ontological status, since to make it possible would be the neuro-biological structures that make up the brain. In this context it is easy to associate the ST not only with the cognitive naturalisation program, but also with the continuous and progressive neuroscientific discoveries that appear, almost daily, in today's cultural landscape; it is certain that the discovery of

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<sup>76</sup> Cfr. ROBERT GORDON, *Folk Psychology as Simulation* in "Mind and Language", 1, 1986, pp. 158-171.

<sup>77</sup> Cfr. DANIEL HUTTO, *Folk Psychological Narratives: The Sociocultural Basis of Understanding Reasons*, MIT Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts), 2008.



*mirror neurons* by Rizzolatti, Sinigaglia *et alii* in the early 1990s provided the driving force for both these studies and the theory itself.

In this theoretical framework, then, *mindreading* presents itself as the agent's ability to internally simulate the experience of others: it would be able to reproduce on a neuro-biological level, therefore in a *first-person* perspective, the mind of the You, empathising with each other. In ST, in fact, empathy returns strongly to attention, since, in the wake of what Vittorio Gallese argued, for example, with the theory of *embodied cognition*, the latter would present itself as the instrumental medium through which *mentalizing* is possible.

The complexity of the *mirror system*, paraphrasing the position of the neuroscientist, would constitute neuro-physiologically the empathy for which through the re-proposal of the experience of the other in one's ego, one would be able to:

- understand the other (and therefore, make intersubjectivity possible);
- provide epistemic credibility to empathy.

Other theorists, on the other hand, would tend to explain its nature starting from its effect; *mindreading*, by marrying an “egocentric” approach to the problem, would be able to understand the differences between oneself and the other from oneself, thereby placing oneself “in the place of the other”.

A change of perspective that would favor the customs clearance of the borders of one's monad to “enter” into that of the You; in this operation, the ability to read the mind would be understood as the attribution of intentional states which, *a priori*, would not exclude the use of *Folk Psychology*. The latter, in fact, would only take over at “game over”, at “simulation completed”<sup>78</sup> to provide the concepts theoretically organised for the intentional attribution.

The role played by the common psychology changes, in respect of the TT:

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<sup>78</sup> Cfr. ALVIN GOLDMAN, *Simulation Mind. The Philosophy, Psychology and Neuroscience of Mindreading*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006.

- from the *Folk Psychology* → to the mind (for the *Theory Theory*);
- from the neuro-biological structures → to the *Folk Psychology* (for the *Simulation Theory*);

even if recent studies seem to question the role played by the agent's own psychology<sup>79</sup>: if so, the Simulation Theory would fall completely.

Following, then, Stueber's reasoning, the ST can be defined as follows:

*Simulation theorists, as the proponents of empathy before them, claim that in contrast to other domains of investigation our folk-psychological understanding of other persons cannot be comprehended as predominantly based on an implicit psychological theory. In contrast to theory theorists – regardless of important differences between them – emphasise that our folk- psychological abilities to understand other agents rest primarily on 'the use of one's own motivational and emotional resources and one's own capacity of practical reasoning' (Gordon 1996, 11) as we 'put ourselves in his shoes', imagine the world 'as it appears from his point of view', and 'then deliberate, reason and see what decision emerges' (Heal 1995a, 47)<sup>80</sup>.*

Controversial within the multi-faceted world of ST is the way in which to understand the term *simulation* and the use that, consequently, it implies; it is no coincidence, in fact, that ST theorists feel the need for a unanimously shared search (at least within the reference paradigm) of the expression used, since as many versions of the ST exist depending on the interpretation provided.

In an article of some years ago, Nichols and Stich<sup>81</sup> supported, for example, that in order to be able to speak in the ST of *mindreading* it should be taken for granted that the *decision making* processes are the same as those underlying this capacity; not only

<sup>79</sup> VITTORIO GALLESE, *Before and Below 'Theory of Mind': Embodied Simulation and the Neural Correlates of Social Cognition*, in "Phil. Trans R. Soc. B.", 362, pp. 659-669.

<sup>80</sup> KARSTEN R. STUEBER, *Rediscovering Empathy*, op. cit., p. 111.

<sup>81</sup> SHAUN NICHOLS E STEPHEN STITCH, *Cognity penetrability, rationality and restricted simulation*, in "Mind and Language", 12, nn3/4, 1997, pp. 297-326.

in the individual agent under consideration, but for all agents who perform mind reading.

If this premise is not satisfied, one cannot speak of *Simulation Theory*, *mentalizing* or *empathy*: for the first and the second one, the sense of the reference paradigm would be betrayed (common denominator of mind reading and neuro-biological mechanisms underlies that these last ones are the same both in *action making* and in the ability to understand the other by themselves, making the neuro-biological processes of the *simulation* “intervene” directly); for the third, however, the use of empathy itself would disappear (in fact, the neurobiological correlate with the addition of the use of the concepts of common psychology would also disappear, the same *ratio* of the phenomenon would also disappear).

Not wanting to go into the specifics, but keeping to a level of understanding of the traceability of the red thread outlined in the path, it can be argued that on the meaning of the term *simulation*, two large deployments have developed within the ST, which differ from one to another for the interpretation and meaning to be assigned to the term and meaning of the expression that a mental state is the mental *simulation* of that of others.

In this regard, it is important to highlight:

- from one side, the *Mental Simulation as Resemblance* (MSR1);
- from the other side, the *Mental Simulation as Reuse* (MSR).

The first approach, as can be understood, interprets the mental states in terms of *similarity*, so if agent A starts a reading of B’s mind this will mean:

- the same functional role will be assigned to mental state M;
- both A and B for M will have the same neural correlate;
- mental state M will have the same content in both A and B;

- the reading of the mind, phenomenologically, for both A and B will take place in the same way<sup>82</sup>;

therefore M in A will be the same mental state M in B only if it respects what has been said.

It is evident, without going into the complex world of MSR1, that the serious *deficit* in which it runs is actually explaining this similarity: how, in fact, could the empirically similarity of M in A with M in B be verified?

It would seem a science fiction scenario rather than the “solution” to the “empathy problem”.

Although there have been many responses to the dilemma, including, remember, the same position as Alvin Goldman, who proposes to interpret the concept of similarity in terms of “symmetric similarity”<sup>83</sup>, to date the question remains and according to some critics this, over time, will cause the same MSR1 to collapse on itself.

An attempt to solve this difficulty would then seem to come from the use of the term *simulation* as *reuse*; in this sense, in fact, we would like to highlight that what underlies the simulation process would not be the brain mechanism, but the cognitive process that follows<sup>84</sup>.

The latter, in fact, even if made in different physiological structures, would not prevent cognition from being able to express the same functionality of the underlying mechanism.

The sequence between the before and after changes (in the MSR1, from the cognition → to the neurobiological mechanisms; in the MSR, from the neurobiological mechanisms → to the cognition), but the problems remain: how can we be sure that the cognitive act of *mentalizing* underlies those mechanisms in all human beings and that the “responsible” of the process are not others?

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<sup>82</sup> Cfr. JUSTIN C. FISHER, *Does Simulation Theory Really Involve Simulation?*, in “Philosophical Psychology”, 19(4), 2006, pp. 417-432.

<sup>83</sup> Cfr. ALVIN GOLDMAN, *Simulation Mind*, op. cit.

<sup>84</sup> Cfr. SUSAN HURLEY, *Understanding Simulation*, in “Philosophy and Phenomenological Research”, 77(3), 2008, pp. 755-774.

This, once again, places simulationists facing a serious theoretical and practical limitation of the original intent (explaining how *mindreading* is possible), so much so that in recent decades hybrid positions have arisen between the *resemble* and the *reuse*, which have given life to the “PROC system”<sup>85</sup>. A meager consolation for the ST; since even this solution is not free from insurmountable difficulties: one of which is the way in which the intervention of the conscience is observed under the direct control of the agent’s will<sup>86</sup>. By now, the world of the ST, as well as that of the TT, seems to have entered a dead end, so much so that, according to some philosophers, it will not be surprising if in a few years there will no longer be a discussion comparing between the two paradigms, but of a complex answer to the *mindreading* problem, which will see the assembly of both TT and ST in a single theory.

The problem in the *Simulation Theory* landscape remains unsolved.

What happened to empathy?

The latter, as mentioned a little further on, has become a tool for legitimizing the mindreading process: no longer empathy that provides knowledge of the other by himself (therefore, cause = effect), but knowledge of the other (effect) is made possible by the consequent work of cognitive empathy (therefore cause → effect).

Until the seventies, the problem of *mentalizing* remained placed within the debate between TT vs ST, actually keeping silent also the problem (since “solved” within the ontological and theoretical statute of *Folk Psychology*) of degree of scientific legitimacy provided by the use of the same reading ability of the mind.

Those who had the burden and the honor of bringing the debate on *mindreading* outside of both the classic schemes of the two dominant paradigms and the context of *Folk Psychology* were two ethologists, David Premack and Guy Woodruff, in the essay *Does the chimpanzee have a Theory of Mind?*<sup>87</sup>.

The two authors hypothesised that the ability to read the mind proper of a Mind Theory could not only include human animals, but should also be extended to non-human

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<sup>85</sup> Cfr. GREGORY CURRIE E IAN RAVENSCROFT, *Recreative Minds: Imagination in Philosophy and Psychology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002.

<sup>86</sup> *IBIDEM*.

<sup>87</sup> Cfr. DANIEL PREMACK E GUY WOODRUFF, *Does the chimpanzee have a theory of mind?*, op. cit.

animals including, in fact, the chimpanzee: the latter, following what has been described, when faced with a task, it is as if

[they would give, n.d.r.] *sense to what they see*[n.d.r.], *assuming that the human agent would wish* [n.d.r.] *the banana and do everything to reach it [...]*<sup>88</sup>,

entering in *empathy* with the experimenters. In other words, the idea that the other's ability to understand was not only an emotional explanation of the most classic way of understanding empathy, but that it could be a real *intra-human* cognitive tool, was making its way back, if you want, to the original intent: empathy as a synonym for *mentalizing*.

Considerable diatribes on the epistemological status of the type of knowledge provided by the use of this particular meaning of cognitive empathy would have opened since that time, between the reworking of classical concepts, refutations and criticisms of various positions, has brought about the current debate at a bifurcation:

- on the one hand, those who remain convinced that the “answer” can be offered either by TT or ST;
- on the other, who, in the light of the need to give a “solution” to the way in which man is able to relate to the other (the recovery of the original intent starting, symbolically, from Quine), supports the epistemically founded validity of the *empathy* use, consequently implying the resolution of not simple problems: the status of the same and, above all, its nature.

In this second sense, the urgent attention powerfully returns, previously encountered, to understand what nature the mankind has; what *res* is basically made of. Once again, the Cartesian question appears in the debate.

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<sup>88</sup> *IDEM.*

### 3.3. Towards the naturalisation of the debate

The emphasis placed on the historical path that *mentalizing* has had from Hume to today should have made it clear that the concept of empathy itself has undergone significant changes over time; now considered as the reference to a gnoseological need now as a contrast to a dominant tradition.

In this long and convoluted tour that has affected about three centuries, today we are faced with the birth of a further problem, far away, at the moment, from any convincing “solution”. We are here referring to the intricate relationship between *mindreading* and *metacognition*.

In the discussion so far it has become clear that the primary need of the *mindreading* conversation has been to legitimise its epistemic knowledge, asking itself, mainly, about its modalities; the focus of the discussion consisted in the relationship between the cognitive effort of the agent and the ability to “enter the mind of the other”, including their desires, intentions and volitions.

Therefore, a debate has started on the relationship between the Ego and the You, that is, in other words, between the *first person metacognition* (the cognitive effort of the agent, for which “in the first person”) and the *third-person mindreading* (the reading of the mind of the You: it is in “third person” because it concerns the other and not oneself).

The attempts to solve the way in which this relationship takes place have been those already encountered: either the two dominant paradigms of the TT and the ST, or the use of the empathic phenomenon, starting - always symbolically - from Quine, demonstrating a predilection for the “consequence of the effect” and not of its cause.

Indeed, claiming that an agent is able to initiate *mentalizing* means, even before studying its effect, to try to understand how the agent’s mind is able to understand itself, starting, first, on itself a cognitive effort and, later, turning this ability on others.

In other words, the relationship between *mindreading (in first person)* and *metacognition (in first person)* between the ability to read the mind and the cognitive effort on oneself (cognition on cognition), has completely disappeared.

Such is, currently, the object of interest of mentalizing.

In this new scenario still to be “built”, two different theories are differentiating, the *Metarepresentational Theory of Metacognition* and the *Control Theory of Metacognition*, both focused on the problem of clarifying the nature of *metacognition*, the function of mental abilities, the nature of content resulting from the ability of *mindreading* and, finally, the identification of which living beings possess these skills. As the expressions themselves suggest, the two “answers” focus on two different aspects of the *mindreading / metacognition* relationship; since the first claims that the cognitive effort aimed at oneself is a metarepresentational ability to attribute mental states, the second that metacognition “would be nothing else” than the ability to control and evaluate one’s cognitive processes through their mental simulation.

Let us proceed with order.

The *Metarepresentational Theory of Metacognition* places the concept of meta-representation at the center of the “solution” of the offending relationship: wanting to stick to the meaning of the word, this means that “the keystone” would lie in the nature of the second-order representation, which has as its content a first-order representation, that is, a representation of a representation<sup>89</sup>.

A particular “representation” that would present four main characteristics:

- the presence of an agent capable of “producing” a representation;
- the representation has a content (both of a real object and of mental states);
- is interconnected with other representations;
- the representation can be interpreted either by the agent himself or by others<sup>90</sup>.

While it is “easier” to discuss the nature of the real object of representation, it is more difficult to establish its nature when a mental state pertains, since problems regarding the type of Theory of the mind that is accepted more plausible than others take place

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<sup>89</sup> Cfr. SAM SCOTT, *Metarepresentation in Philosophy and Psychology*, available article online at following address: <http://conferences.inf.ed.ac.uk/cogsci2001/pdf-files/0910.pdf>

<sup>90</sup> Cfr. CHARLES SANDERS PEIRCE, *Semiotics and Signifcs*, Ed. Charles Hardwick, Indiana University Press, Bloomington I.N, 1977.



in reflection; however, regardless of the type of interpretation adopted, it would seem that human cognition<sup>91</sup>

[...] ha[s, n.d.r.] the following three properties: (a) each capacity is intentional; it involves states that have content or are “about” something; (b) virtually all of the capacities are pragmatically evaluable; that is, they can be exercised with varying degrees of success; and (c) most of the capacities are productive; once a person has the capacity in question, he or she is typically in a position to manifest it in a practically unlimited number of novel ways. To account for these features, we must posit mental representations that are able to represent specific objects; to represent many different kinds of objects — concrete objects, sets, properties, events, and states of affairs in this world, in possible worlds, and in fictional worlds as well as abstract objects such as universals and numbers; to represent both an object (*tout court*) and an aspect of that object (or both extension and intension); and to represent both correctly and incorrectly. In addition, if we take seriously the productivity of our cognitive capacities, we must posit representations with constituent structure and a compositional semantics<sup>92</sup>.

From this perspective, therefore, *meta-representation* would be configured as the agent’s ability to “think about his own thought”, distinguishing, in this sense, a sort of “hierarchy” between typical thoughts of *metacognition*; this would make it possible, in turn, to start attributing to oneself beliefs, wishes and desires, configuring the typical activity of *mindreading*.

It would seem that in this paradigm *mindreading* appears almost as an inferential activity of interpretation of those second-order contents (thoughts), which would have been primarily interpreted by *mentalizing* and, only later on,

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<sup>91</sup> The choice of having the human being as an object only and exclusively depends on the intention, already made explicit in the Introduction, to draw a red thread on the concept of *mentalizing* in the only philosophical tradition.

<sup>92</sup> BARBARA VON ECKARDT, *Mental Representation*, in ROBERT A. WILSON E FRANK C. KEIL (Eds), *MIT Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science*, The MIT PRESS, Cambridge (Massachusetts), 1999, p. 529.

[...] *turning our mindreading capacities upon ourselves*<sup>93</sup>.

This means that in order for *metacognition* to occur, the primary mentalizing activity, based in turn, on the attribution of “psychological concepts” on which, at the moment, there is no clear categorical identification on what they actually denote: only intentions or beliefs or even emotions<sup>94</sup>?

From an epistemological point of view, moreover, since *mindreading* is the ability to “know” the other, the same legitimacy and reliability would have the knowledge deriving from introspection: the latter would present itself as the result of *mindreading* turned on itself thus outlining a framework of the relationship between *metacognition/mentalizing* decidedly *sui generis*.

In this perspective, in fact, the nature of the former derives, on the one hand, from the type of theory of the shared mind and, on the other, from the activity proper to the second which, according to the *status quo*, would not seem to throw light nor on its nature nor about its epistemic *status*. It is as if, in the writer’s opinion, once again the central problem of reading the mind is set aside by virtue of “more important problems”, which would promise to “resolve” the doubts in this regard.

To affirm, in fact, that the representation proper to a mental state depends on the ability to read the mind means to combine two analytical judgments *a priori* in an equation, obvious in themselves and far from empirical verification; how, in fact, could the analysis of *metacognition* resolve doubts if its “explanation” is made to depend on the activity of the object on which it should help solve the dilemmas? It would seem, therefore, the structuring of a *petitio principii*, in which the proposition that must be tried is already supposed in the premises: a fallacious reasoning, which muddies the waters even more.

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<sup>93</sup> PETER CARRUTHERS, *How we know our own minds: the relationship between mindreading and metacognition*. in “Behavioral and Brain Sciences”, 32, 1, 2009, p. 8.

<sup>94</sup> On the attribution of emotions to oneself through the activity of metacognition is a source of doubts and conflicting positions within the Dominant Theory. Cfr., for example, RADU J. BOGDAN, *Why self-ascriptions are difficult and developate?* in BERTRAM F. MALLE E SARA D. HODGES (EDS.), *Other minds. How humans bridge the divide between self and the others*, The Guilford Press, New York, 2005.

The other “response” to the relationship between *metacognition / mindreading* is, as mentioned, the *Control Theory of Metacognition*, in which the use of psychological concepts and conceptual content, in general, typical of *mentalizing* activity, moves away. Not implying, that is to say, any mind-reading activity on which the self-attribution of beliefs, intentions and the like would depend, *off-line simulation* is at the center of the relationship. Returning to the conceptual cornerstone of the ST, control theorists are convinced that *metacognition* is the ability to control one’s cognitive processes and mental dispositions, going beyond any psychological concept. In control theorists any theory of the mind is absent, since they are convinced that the latter can represent a set of concepts on which intentional attribution depends; *mindreading*, therefore, does not present itself as the ability to attribute to oneself first or second order desires or beliefs, but as “empathic activity”: “pretending to”, “putting oneself in someone else’s shoes” presents itself as an ability to “change the point of view”, made possible by the control over one’s cognitive activities<sup>95</sup>.

Whether this control includes neuro-biological mechanisms or implies pre-conscious, pre-verbal, instinctual use of the same is still the subject of debate.

Both sides have been at the center of strong criticisms and refutations regarding the interpretation to be attributed, in addition to the meaning of the metarepresentation, also to its methodology of action.

An increasingly convoluted and complex debate is taking place on how to access, in the mind, metacognition and mindreading, hypothesising synthetically one or two channels of access to the latter. This is the case, for example, of what is claimed by Nichols and Stich, who, sharing the modular theory of the mind, claim that there are two or more mechanisms of “self monitoring”, depending on whether we are talking about *mindreading* or *metacognition* or, on the other hand, a *mindreading / metacognition* explanation model which predicted for the priority of one of the two over the other<sup>96</sup>.

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<sup>95</sup> Cfr. RICK GRUSH, *The emulation theory of representation: motor control, imagery, and perception*, in “Behavioral and Brain Sciences”, 27, 2004, pp. 377-442.

<sup>96</sup> Cfr., DAN SPENCER E DEIRDRE WILSON, *Pragmatics, Modularity and Mindreading*, in “Mind and Language”, Wiley, 17 (1), 2002, pp. 3-33; KEITH FRANKISH, *Mind and Supermind*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.

In both cases it is evident that in the conceptual *excursus* of empathy in the current debate there is very little of the original phenomenon (the benevolence of *humeana memoria* or the ontological construction of the world) to arrive, falsely, at a theme that substantially moves away from the one we started from; to think, in fact, that the relationship between *mindreading* / *metacognition* represents an evolution of the mind's reading ability is, in the writer's opinion, an incorrect position. The intricate report, in fact, highlights that the debate is collapsing on itself, trying, through the identification of false problems on false issues, to find a way out; the latter cannot be provided either by the naturalisation of the mental or by the use of any new theory on metacognition that may or may not imply empathic use.

The edge of the skein is found elsewhere: in the very nature of cognitive empathy.

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## Conclusions

As we have seen, the current debate is moving towards the “sectorialisation” of the relationship between *metacognition / mindreading*, in content and modalities still to be written.

It is certain that, being a “new” problem, it is currently difficult to predict where it will lead, but despite all the necessary precautions, we are increasingly convinced that we are faced with the development of a theoretical paradox.

If it is true, in fact, that there is unanimity in supporting the differentiation of the empathic phenomenon in a primary (or basic) and cognitive aspect, making mentalizing fit into the latter, then trying to naturalize the reading of the mind means betraying the original intent. In other words, it means giving an explanation of the empathic nature, cognitively understood, no longer through the categories proper to the phenomenon, but according to the rationale of a different methodological approach: the use, in the laboratory, of neuro-scientific techniques. We would witness the depletion not only of the purely cognitive aspect of the same, but would lead to a “flattening” of the *mindreading* problem on the identification of one or more areas of the brain “responsible” for basic empathy. At that point, it would not be an approach similar to the ST, nor naturalised attempts at cognition, but only a sliding from one phenomenon to another.

The paradox, therefore, lies in the fact that trying to explain the reading of the mind with a view to basic empathy means making a methodological error whose implication is not explanatory, neither for primary empathy nor for cognitive empathy; without considering, moreover, the very serious structural and conceptual limits that such an approach should overcome: how to neuro-biologically identify the area of *mentalizing* and its contents from a hypothetical “reader” to an equally hypothetical “reading” agent?

Forgetting, again, that the questions raised by the current debate on the nature of the relationship between *metacognition* and “access to the mental”, in my opinion, are

muddying the waters even further by a precise and timely analysis that should be conducted on the phenomenon of secondary empathy.

I believe we are witnessing, once again, a departure from the original problem (what is empathy?) to favor secondary or non-existent aspects of the phenomenon.

I refer, in addition to what has just been outlined, to the entire conceptual path that the phenomenon has had from Hume to today; from Descartes to the contemporary.

From what has been read, the personal interpretation of cognitive empathy does not stop at the mere belief that it constitutes a “more modern” answer to the doubt raised by the French philosopher in the Seventeenth century, but goes further: cognitive empathy does not exist.

It does not exist if declined in its meaning of “mind reading” or “ability to enter the mind of the other, putting themselves as a comparison, to understand any similarities and differences compared to oneself”, since it seems to me that at the basis of the cognitively understood act there are neither privileged accesses in the first person through the medium of another (*Folk Psychology*) nor who knows what complex relationship between oneself and one’s own cognition; more “simply”, we are faced with the manifestation of the agent’s free will.

I argue that there is a *choice* at the basis of *mentalizing*, since in addition to not convincing me the answers given to the problem throughout its history, especially if we consider the analytical tradition, to date the same nature of cognitive effort remains doubtful in the debate: what is its nature? Does it actually have epistemic *status*? And how can we explain, if we can, the knowledge of which it would be the author?

These are all questions that, according to the positions present in today’s cultural landscape, in my opinion have not found answers; this due to the fact that replacing the cognitively understood nature of empathy with that of free will would mean joining two lines of reflection which, both now and always, have been considered distinct: on the one hand, the one relating to *mindreading*; on the other, that relating to free will.

An operation, however, that would benefit the clarification of the empathic nature.

At that point it would be evident to most that the latter, as already said, was used as a transcendental tool to answer the Cartesian doubt, placing it (unlike the French

philosopher) in “natural” conditions so as not to fall victim to an incommunicability between self and the “material” world.

It is on this intent, in fact, that the problem of *mentalizing* has been structured above all in the last century, even reaching the idea of a “pineal gland” outside of man himself: *Folk Psychology*. Such was the “gnoseological” structuring of common knowledge, organised into a theory, since, having to ban any dualism from the explanation of human nature from the reflexive sphere, an element of conjunction between “thought” and “matter” was needed: the *corpus* of common knowledge has served precisely this purpose.

It is no coincidence, in fact, that (following this interpretation) the debate is currently focusing on the nature of the *cogito*, which (in contemporary terms) translates as identifying the nature of thought capable of using itself to understand the other by itself: mindreading.

The whole debate continues to wrap around itself to escape Descartes, whose dualism, after about four centuries, is more current than ever.

In conclusion, therefore, there are three focal aspects of the whole reasoning:

1. the reading of the mind in the cognitively understood meaning of empathy should be the subject of interest of the tradition of the Philosophy of the Mind and not, as currently exists, the area of interest of the emotional sphere. The purely sentimental aspect, in fact, is either totally excluded from the debate on its nature or completely marginal; as proof of the fact that mindreading affects another phenomenon than the one denoted.

In this way, the *ratio* that supports the expression “cognitive empathy” falls.

2. On the “effective” nature of *mentalizing* as a manifestation, perhaps *sui generis*, of free will, I suspend judgment; it is still the subject of personal reflection and there are still many doubts to be resolved.



3. Finally, I agree that according to what has been said so far, the phenomenon of cognitive empathy does not exist, since it has been completely emptied of its original meaning. Another expression must be found that is not the banner of a conceptual tradition that does not refer to the phenomenon in question, but which makes its nature immediately evident.

Until this operation is completed, the expression “cognitive empathy” itself will give rise to errors, false problems, theoretical approximations.

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