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# HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND OTHERS? EMPATHY AND THEORY-THEORY OF MIND AS TWO DIFFERENT, BUT COOPERATIVE, MECHANISMS FOR SENSIBILITY

*abstract*

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*The aim of this paper is to understand whether Theory-Theory of Mind (TToM) can be considered the one and only source of our understanding of others or not.*

*I support the idea that TToM cannot have such a role and that it can be played only by basic empathy - a sui generis perception.*

*In this paper, I challenge TToM as basic, I then consider the notion of “empathy” and I provide a very narrow definition of low-level empathy, that I compare to Scheler’s account on affective phenomena.*

*keywords*

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*Theory-Theory of Mind, basic empathy, Max Scheler, sui generis perception*

## 1. Introduction

The traditional view in the cognitive sciences holds that humans are able to understand the behaviour of others in terms of their mental states—intentions, beliefs and desires (Gallese 2007, 659).

The way in which we do that was challenged long ago by the discovery of the so-called mirror neuron system (MNS) (Rizzolatti et al. 1996, Rizzolatti et al. 2001, Gallese 2003a,b), and by its consequent extension to our ability to share feelings. The point at issue here is that of understanding how and to what extent MNS can change our standard comprehension of the way we enter into a relationship with other human beings. Motor MNS does not require the subject to be aware of the fact that when he himself makes a specific movement or he perceives that movement performed by someone else the same neural mechanisms are active. If our affective mirror system doesn't require our cognitive and conscious understanding of the fact that we are actually mirroring – just like the motor MNS doesn't require it – how does it work? If it is a kind of sub-personal level of comprehension of co-specifics, how does it change the conscious and personal level of that understanding? To answer these questions I will need both to challenge the traditional view of Theory-Theory of Mind (TToM) as the basis of intersubjectivity and to take into consideration how a sub-personal and Mind (TToM) as the basis of intersubjectivity and to take into consideration how a sub-personal and unconscious mechanism of comprehension of others has been analyzed within the phenomenological tradition, since it can provide some further insight into the relation between this basic understanding – the natural, primitive and unconscious way of mirroring other people's emotional states – and the more sophisticated one obtained by means of TToM – that is just one among other more complicated mechanisms of comprehension of others. The idea is that this basic tool to understand others and TToM are two distinct mechanisms of sensibility – that is, of the ability to enter into a relation with co-specifics, to understand their intentions, beliefs, desires, and feelings. On the one hand, there is an immediate mechanism of perception of others<sup>1</sup> – that is itself subject, as any other sense is, to the problem of perception; while, on the other, TToM will be defined as a mentalistic, theoretical, “second-order” theory. In the first case, we perceive a certain emotion; in the second, we infer a certain mental state by more complex

1 “a special kind of perception” (Ingarden 1994).

mentalizing abilities. The aim is not that of eliminating one of the two possible mechanisms, but to understand which one is more fundamental.

2.  
Before  
and Below  
TToM: Some  
Criticism

The idea that our understanding of other beings' mental states can only derive from a complex set of mental processes of attribution needs to face some serious criticism.

We can define TToM as follows:

By theory of mind we mean being able to infer the full range of mental states (beliefs, desires, intentions, imagination, emotions, etc.) that cause action. In brief, having a theory of mind is to be able to *reflect* on the contents of one's own and other's minds (Baron-Cohen 2001, 174, emphasis added).

This model specifies a mechanism which underlies a crucial aspect of social skills, namely being able to conceive of mental states: that is, *knowing* that other people know, want, feel, or believe things (...). A theory of mind is impossible without the capacity to form 'second-order representations' (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, Frith 1985, 38, emphasis added).

So TToM will be defined for the purposes of this work as a mechanism to attribute mental states to others.<sup>2</sup> It requires complex, theoretical capacities – like 'second-order representations'. It is a mentalistic mechanism, enabling us to *know* about the beliefs and intentions of others.

Theory of Mind is the branch of cognitive science that investigates how we ascribe mental states to other persons and how we use the states to explain and predict the actions of those other persons. More accurately, it is the branch that investigates mindreading or mentalizing or mentalistic abilities (Marraffa 2011, 1).

My aim is not that of claiming that this version of TToM is false or useless, but only that it cannot be claimed to be exhaustive as far as social cognition and the basis of intersubjectivity are concerned nor it can be our basic mechanism to understand others. TToM has to be phylogenetically and ontogenetically secondary.

Three remarks will be sufficient here. First of all, if we consider in particular

<sup>2</sup> There is obviously much more to say about the definition of TToM and the one advanced here is not the only possible version.

the case of emotional comprehension of others (but similar cases can be designed also concerning intentions and beliefs), we often feel it in our gut long before we can understand it mentally (Zahavi 2012). Provided the acceptance of the parallelism between what we feel when we are actually experiencing an emotion and when we are seeing it in someone else – a parallelism that should not necessarily be abandoned by TToM, the difference lies in the process to acquire such a parallelism (an intellectual process moving by inference on the one hand, and a perception of similarity on the other), not in the final result – we can assume as evidence all the results that have been acquired since the first theories of emotions (Kandel et al. 2000, 983-986). The fact that, in contexts of extreme distress, we have peripheral reactions before we are consciously aware of them or we can distinguish what kind of emotion is involved, constitutes itself as a consistent criticism against the idea that our comprehension of other people's emotions needs a complex set of mentalistic and intellectual attributions. The process of understanding looks too fast to undergo such a complex mechanism, that requires consciousness.

Whenever we are exposed to behaviours of others requiring our response, be it reactive or simply attentive, we seldom engage in explicit and deliberate interpretative acts. The majority of the time our understanding of the situation is immediate, automatic and almost reflex-like (Gallese 2003a, 520).

The second and third remarks deal with the fact that infants and primates are capable of interacting with one another without having the conscious and mentalistic categories to attribute intentions, beliefs, desires and emotions to others. The idea is that the mother-son bond comes before and somehow constitutes the child's capability of entering into that kind of relation with the world and with other beings described by TToM. If we consider the strongest version of TToM, it is clearly implausible that it constitutes the *only* tool we have to enter into the worlds of others. The speed of the process and the fact that even primates and neonates have a kind of sharing can be considered, if not conclusive evidence, at least relevant clues to the fact that TToM cannot be our *first* and *basic* tool to enter into a relationship with others. This does not mean that TToM cannot have a role in our understanding of others, it means only that it is somehow secondary. So,

it is possible to considerably deflate the role played by abstract theorizing when ascribing mental states (at least some mental states) to others.

My thesis is that many aspects of our felt capacity to entertain social relationships with other individuals, the ease with which we ‘mirror’ ourselves in the behaviour of others and recognize them as similar to us, they all have a common root: empathy (Gallese 2001, 42).

- 3. Empathy: A Narrow Definition** Empathy, thus, can constitute such a basic, sub-personal and direct level of comprehension of others. Dan Zahavi correctly underlines the difference between the “that question” and the “why question”, which can be very useful to understand the difference between empathy and TToM.

To see *that* another person is angry or performing a specific action is already a form of interpersonal understanding that arguably depends on a basic form of empathy. But even if we ascribe a certain primacy to this rather primitive, automatic and affective form of social understanding, one also has to realize its clear limitations. It doesn’t as such provide us with an understanding of *why* somebody is angry or performing the action in question. And if the latter kind of understanding also requires a form of empathy, we are dealing with a cognitively more complex type (Zahavi 2012, 81).

Besides this relevant difference, it is still true that:

The point is *how* to characterize this special form of *understanding* (Gallese 2003, 519).

As De Vignemont and Singer (De Vignemont, Singer 2006) have pointed out, there have been some interesting results since the discovery of MNS regarding human ability to mirror emotional states of other individuals. The theoretical point is that of understanding what exactly this ability is, how it works and to what extent we can use it.

Besides the huge interest that this issue has raised in literature, a common definition of the matter has not been found yet. Therefore, it is true that:

There are probably nearly as many definitions of empathy as people working on the topic (De Vignemont, Singer 2006, 435).

This, of course, constitutes a matter of controversy and it hinders the possibility of a fruitful dialogue. I will furnish a narrow definition of low-

level empathy – narrower both than the one proposed by De Vignemont and Singer themselves and than that endorsed by Gallese (Gallese 2001, 42-43).<sup>3</sup> The reason for this choice – of a narrow definition – is twofold. On a purely conceptual level, besides the complexity and the variety of words used and of definitions proposed, I believe the phenomenological tradition had a lot to say about different levels of affective sharing. So, I would like to interpret low-level empathy (Coplan, Goldie 2011)<sup>4</sup> solely as the basic, sub-personal and unconscious level of that comprehension of others, leaving plenty of room for more sophisticated, more personal and conscious ways to achieve it. Concerning the usage of words – e.g. low-level empathy, emotional contagion, fellow-feeling, affective sharing, sympathy, and the like – there is no agreement between philosophers, but I think the basic elements are implicitly shared. So, some common ground can be found. On the other hand, concerning the connection between phenomenology and neuroscience, to narrow down the concept of basic empathy to its very minimal elements could make it easier to find its neural basis.

There is empathy if: (i) one is in an affective state; (ii) this state is isomorphic to another person's affective state; (iii) this state is elicited by the observation or imagination of another person's affective state (De Vignemont, Singer 2006, 435).

And (iv) the subject is not necessarily conscious of the difference between subjects.

This last condition is contrary to the one displayed by De Vignemont and Singer, since they posit a self-other distinction within their definition of empathy. My point is that there can be phenomena of empathy that include the distinction between subjects, but they lie on a more complex level, not on the simplest and more basic one – which is the topic of my interest here. Again, the example of the mother-child bond can clarify this point. The child has no perception of the distinction between himself and his mother and yet he shares with her a great deal of feelings and emotions.

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3 As far as Gallese's version is concerned, I think De Vignemont and Singer's remarks against a broad sense of empathy find their mark: "this definition does not enable precise claims to be made about the nature of empathy or its automaticity because one can always reply that it depends on the level of empathy" (De Vignemont, Singer 2006, 435); and, moreover, it prevents the possibility of distinguishing "empathy from other related phenomena" (De Vignemont, Singer 2006, 435).

4 Zahavi distinguishes between "basic" and "complex" empathy (Zahavi 2012). In what follows, I will use "basic" and "low-level" as synonyms.

4.  
The  
Phenomenological  
Tradition: Max  
Scheler's Account  
as an Example

To what extent can the phenomenological tradition enter such a debate? And how can it provide some further insight? I will try to answer these questions by considering in particular Scheler's account on *The Nature of Sympathy* (Scheler 1923). Besides the evident sketchiness, I believe the elements to be put forward will prove useful for the aim of this work. Obviously some further research and a deeper analysis of other accounts by phenomenologists is still needed.

In his work, Scheler distinguishes four phenomena of affective sharing:

1. Immediate community of feeling, e.g. of one and the same sorrow, 'with someone'.
2. Fellow-feeling 'about something'; rejoicing in his joy and commiseration with his sorrow.
3. Mere emotional infection.
4. True emotional identification (Scheler 1923, 12).

The phenomenon relevant for the matter at issue here, is the last one, i.e. "true emotional identification". It is a sub-personal state in which individuals are not yet distinct subjects, but they are merged into an indistinct flow. Even after the process of individualization, subjects can – but it happens infrequently – return to that state occasionally, as in the case of a constant hypnosis (Scheler 1923, 20). True emotional identification represents the original presence of the "us" within the "I": it is the primitive basis of all these kinds of acts of intersubjectivity and of the possibility of social cognition. That is, this identification is a return to a cosmos-vital stage when, ontogenetically and phylogenetically, subjects were not distinct individuals, but one and the same vital community. It is unconscious, automatic and sub-personal.

The essential character of human consciousness is such that the community is in some such sense implicit in every individual, and that man is not only part of society, but that society and the social bond are an essential bond of himself (Scheler 1923, 229).

The relationship between a mother and her son or daughter is a good example of this shared presence of the community within every individual:

The child feels the feelings and thinks the thoughts of those who form his social environment, and there is one broad roaring stream of living in which he is totally immersed (Scheler 1923, XXXIX).

Scheler doesn't claim that this phenomenon is the only kind of empathic experience, but that it is the more basic and fundamental one, without which every other experience – i.e. the other three phenomena quoted above, together with altruism and philanthropy – would not be possible. True emotional identification represents the necessary, but not sufficient, basis for every other phenomenon of comprehension of others, even for the most personal and conscious ones, just like altruism and philanthropy. What Scheler considers really interesting, from a purely moral point of view, are the more personal and conscious levels of sharing.

How can this minimal presentation of Scheler's account on empathy be useful for my purposes here? How can he answer the questions mentioned above? Scheler provides us with a very interesting and detailed conceptual distinction that helps us both in the comprehension of the basic elements of empathy and in the examination of the superior and more complex levels of it. His account can provide some further insight, if properly interpreted, on what it is to have a purely empathic experience and supplies the categories – personal or sub-personal, conscious or unconscious, feeling the state of others, understanding it mentally, or acting because of it in a certain way – useful to place every related phenomenon in its proper place.

Finally, concerning the relation between phenomenology and neuroscience, I believe Scheler's account on true emotional identification, as the fundamental cosmo-vital stage, should be challenged by neuroscience.

**5. Conclusions** A proper conceptual distinction makes experimental tasks more precise and the results more useful, and that is also the reason why I believe a narrow definition of basic empathy should be adopted. At this level, phenomenologists, and on this topic, Scheler in particular, can definitely help the research.

Regarding the relation between low-level empathy and TToM, my proposal stems from these assumptions that I have been analysing in this work:

1. TToM cannot be *the one and only* source of our understanding of others, since it presupposes complex mental attributions that cannot be achieved (a) as quickly as we often do, (b) by neonates and (c) by primates.
2. Nevertheless, TToM should not be wholly abandoned, we only need to recognize that it is not basic.
3. If TToM is not the tool for our basic understanding of others, what can play such a role? Basic empathy, our affective ability to 'mirror' other people's emotional states. A *sui generis* perception.



Empathy itself needs to be properly interpreted. I think a broad sense of it will not prove very useful since it will simply be a label for phenomena with a huge variety of characteristics, and because it will let TToM go. So, besides the obvious difference in terminology, I will use Scheler's definition of true emotional identification for my account on basic empathy. It is a very narrow definition of the concept, but I believe it will prove useful on different levels. This move does not aim to reduce every related phenomenon to my definition of low-level empathy, but just to provide the minimal and more fundamental kind.

Empathy and TToM are two different mechanisms at work in our understanding of others and in the way we are capable of sharing intentions, beliefs, desires, and emotions. They are not exclusive. Empathy is ontogenetically and phylogenetically primitive; TToM is more complex and has to do with superior forms of sharing and of comprehension (Lamm 2007).

Furthermore, even empathy is more complex than I could have analyzed here: besides the low-level kind that I have considered, there are superior forms of empathy (as shown also by means of Scheler's distinctions) that complicate the framework. A great deal of work needs to be done concerning the relations between low-level empathy (or basic), high-level one (or complex) and sympathy, TToM, altruism and philanthropy.

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