



Title	Primary Intersubjectivity: Empathy, Affective Reversibility, 'Self-affection' and the Primordial 'We'
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Publication date	2014-04
Publication information	Daly, Anya. "Primary Intersubjectivity: Empathy, Affective Reversibility, 'Self-Affection' and the Primordial 'We.'" Springer, April 2014. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-013-9206-7 .
Publisher	Springer
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/8205
Publisher's statement	The final publication is available at Springer via http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11245-013-9206-7 .
Publisher's version (DOI)	10.1007/s11245-013-9206-7

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*Primary Intersubjectivity: Empathy, Affective Reversibility, 'Self-Affection' and the Primordial 'We'*¹

Interrogations of intersubjectivity tend to focus primarily on the issue of access – how is it possible that from one subject's seemingly self-enclosed interiority, a subject may come to know that an-Other is minded in the same way as s/he is. That is, that this Other enjoys all the mental states that the subject enjoys – beliefs, desires, intentions, imaginations, and emotion – and that these may constitute reasons for action. For the most part such interrogations have been pursued in a mentalistic manner, through philosophical frameworks which valorize representation, inference and cognition as being the only reliable and legitimate modes of intersubjective access.² In contrast, I propose that through phenomenological analysis allied with neuroscientific research, in addition to synthesizing the relevant insights of Colwyn Trevarthen's three tiered account of subjectivity/ intersubjectivity³ along with Shaun Gallagher's *Interaction Theory*,⁴ it is possible, I argue, to give an account of embodied intersubjective access that is compelling for its explanatory power, its coherence and its comprehensiveness. Gallagher's account of *Interaction Theory*, which he establishes on the basis of both Merleau-Ponty's accounts of embodiment and pre-reflective percipience and also current neuroscience, is entirely convincing, and this primary level intersubjectivity is the core around which the secondary and the tertiary can develop. Trevarthen's three tiered account of subjectivity and Gallagher's *Interaction Theory* thus serve to both structure and underwrite the account of responsive primary intersubjectivity that I am advancing.

¹ <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11245-013-9206-7>

Topoi Vol. 33, Issue 1, Special Issue – *Embodiment and Empathy: Current Debates in Social Cognition*, Anya Daly "Primary Intersubjectivity: Empathy, Affective reversibility, 'self-affection' and the primordial 'we' ". Republished here with permission from Springer Publishing. Please cite according to this information – not the website.

² Representationalists – Dretske, F(1981; 1995); Fodor, J.A. (1981); Devitt, M. (1996); Tye, M. (2000; 2009); Clark, A. (20002) ; Chalmers, D. (2004); Block, N. (2003); Hohwy, J (2007). What I dispute strongly in the representationalist account is the pre-eminence given to cognitive capacities over non-cognitive capacities and the tendency to claim that this account is *the* definitive account. On the basis of the work of the philosophers mentioned below, it is clear that representation plays no role at the level of primary subjectivity. However, I do recognise the important though more circumscribed than previously supposed role that cognitive capacities and representation may play at the secondary level of subjectivity and that they are crucial at the tertiary level of intersubjective engagement wherein metadiscursive capacities are paramount. For analyses which decisively repudiate the hegemony of representationalist accounts see – Shaun Gallagher, Daniel Hutto, Jan Slaby & Jonathan Cole (2013) "The brain as part of an enactive system", *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 36 ; 421-422 doi :10.1017/S0140525X12002105 (abstract sighted 26-8-13, on order but yet to receive); Shaun Gallagher (2005) *How the Body Shapes the Mind* , London: Clarendon Press; Dan Zahavi (2005) *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First Person Perspective* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Hubert Dreyfus (1998) "Intelligence Without Representation" <http://www.class.uh.edu/cogsci/dreyfus.html> Retrieved 26th November 2011; Sean D. Kelly (2002) "Merleau-Ponty on the Body" in *Ratio* (new series) XV 4 December 2002, 0034-0006 Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

³ Trevarthen, C. (1998) "The concept and foundations of infant intersubjectivity" in S. Braten (ed) *Intersubjective Communication and Emotion in Early Ontogeny* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press pp. 15-46

⁴ Gallagher, S. (2005) *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, London: Clarendon Press

The overarching argument of this paper is that because of the very nature of primary subjectivity, intersubjective access is simultaneously responsive; there is not an initial access, apprehending that the Other is minded in the same manner as the subject, followed by a reaction, an affective response, which informs and motivates any subsequent action towards this Other. Rather, responsivity in non-pathological cases co-arises with access, and further this responsivity crucially depends on the capacity for primary empathy. It is in this way, that the capacity for primary empathy becomes the touchstone for ethical action.⁵

How are we to understand this notion of primary empathy? There is much confusion in the current literature in regard to both the terminology and the processes involved in empathy.⁶ By way of preliminary clarification, I propose that if the various manifestations of empathy are located at the appropriate level of subjectivity/ intersubjectivity according to Trevarthen's seminal work, then the confusions dissipate. There are three key ideas from the phenomenological tradition which, in my view, offer a richly intuitive and satisfyingly coherent account of the role of empathy in subjectivity/ intersubjectivity. These ideas are: firstly, Merleau-Ponty's *reversibility thesis*,⁷ the core of his later work,⁸ which argues for reversible relations between perceptual and linguistic relata and I propose it is possible to apply this same thesis to affect; and affective reversibility is the capacity for empathy; secondly, the idea of 'self-affection' as a dimension of lived subjectivity, that includes both pre-reflective self-awareness and self-responsiveness, offers another lens through which to examine primary empathy; thirdly, at the core of primary subjectivity there is both the 'I' perspective and the

⁵ This paper is a revised, condensed version of a chapter from my doctoral thesis "The Problem of the Other in the Work of Merleau-Ponty: From Epistemology to Ethics" (2012). The thesis sought to explicate Merleau-Ponty's implicit ethics on the basis of his accounts of alterity and also drew on recent neuroscience as empirical support to vindicate some of his claims.

⁶ See the later discussions of Batson (2009) and Coplan (2012).

⁷ "What is the Reversibility Thesis? The reversibility thesis is the thesis that self, other and world are inherently relational - not in the obvious and trivial sense that they stand in relation to each other, can affect each other, that there are actual and potential causal connections between them. This without question is so and these relations occur between entities that are external to each other. Merleau-Ponty's *Reversibility Thesis*, however, proposes that self, other and world are internally related, that there is interdependence at the level of ontology. What does it mean to be internally related? The other - whether other subjectivities or the otherness of the world and things - is essential for self-awareness and vice versa. No self can be apprehended without an-other. Ipseity and alterity are mutually dependent and this interdependence is both pervasive and intrinsic. What is at stake in the reversibility thesis is whether it is able to overcome skeptical objections in assuring real communication and at the same time avoid any collapse into solipsism in assuring real difference. The Other must be a genuine, irreducible Other". Anya Daly (2013) "Does the *Reversibility Thesis* deliver all that Merleau-Ponty claims it can?" *European Journal of Philosophy* (forthcoming) p.2 & 3.

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, M. *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingus (1968) Evanston: Northwestern University Press (French original) (1964) *Le visible et l'invisible*, Paris: Gallimard (VI: 133, 138, 142, 147, 153, 155, 215, 263, 272; VI: 176, 182, 187, 194, 200, 204, 268, 316, 325)

'we' perspective and so Husserl's claim that 'subjectivity is an intersubjectivity'⁹, thus attains deepened significance revealing that our intersubjective responsiveness is intrinsic to the very structure of our subjectivity. It is important to note that all three of these ideas are deeply intertwined and in fact they may be understood as simply different but complementary ways of articulating the phenomenon of subjectivity/ intersubjectivity.

This paper pursues the investigation of intersubjectivity drawing on both traditional and current writings of phenomenology and it should be further noted that I deploy phenomenological methodology as well. Sometimes claims are argued for and at other times I use the phenomenological method of detailed descriptive analysis of the lived experience. It is important to remember that phenomenology is as much a 'showing' as a 'telling'.¹⁰

The arguments advanced in this paper are the following. Firstly, that just as the three intersubjective levels,¹¹ primary, secondary, and tertiary, mapped out different modes of access, so too response is similarly structured, from direct primordial responsiveness, to that informed by shared pragmatic concerns and narrative contexts, to that which demands the distanciation afforded by representation. Secondly, I propose that empathy is an essential mode of intentionality, integral to the primary level of subjectivity/ intersubjectivity, which is crucial to our survival as individuals and as a species. Further to this last point, I argue that empathy is not derived on the basis of intersubjectivity, nor does it merely disclose intersubjectivity, rather it is constitutive of intersubjectivity at the primary level. Empathy is a direct, irreducible intentionality separable in thought from the other primary intentional

⁹ *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität III*, in *Husserliana XV*, 74-75 and also in *Erste Philosophie II* in *Husserliana VIII*, 480. These references represent approximations to the quote above, which has been frequently cited by other researchers. Merleau-Ponty also writes: "Transcendental subjectivity is a revealed subjectivity, revealed to itself and to others, and is for that reason an intersubjectivity" (PP:361, PP:421, PP:419).

Dan Zahavi in the chapter "Merleau-Ponty on Husserl: a Reappraisal" - in *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*, (2002) T. Toadvine & L. Embree (eds), Kluwer Academic Publishers: Dordrecht - furnishes the most conclusive and thorough account of this scholarly dispute. He writes: "As I have already indicated, scholars have occasionally claimed that not all of Merleau-Ponty's references to passages in Husserl's unpublished manuscripts should be taken at face value. Spiegelberg, for instance, points out that Merleau-Ponty's repeated quotation of a statement in Husserl's *Krisis* to the effect that transcendental subjectivity is an intersubjectivity is actually not contained in this work. But although Husserl might not have made exactly that statement in *Krisis*, he did so elsewhere, for instance in *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität III*. Here Husserl writes: "I have to distinguish: the currently transcendental phenomenologizing subjectivity (as an actual ego – monad), and transcendental subjectivity as such; the latter turns out to be transcendental intersubjectivity, which includes the transcendental phenomenologizing subjectivity within itself" (Hua XV 74-5). ... [and further] he writes that transcendental subjectivity in its full universality is exactly intersubjectivity (Hua VIII 480)." Zahavi (2002) p.24

¹⁰ For explanations of phenomenological methodology see Zahavi (2005: 4-6); Gallagher (2012); Merleau-Ponty, Introduction of the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945, 2006)

¹¹ Trevarthen *Op. Cit.* (1998) pp. 15-46

modes of perception, rationality, memory and imagination, but co-arising with these. In regard to the inter-personal level, the concrete relations with others, primary empathy is both the ground for the possibility of the secondary manifestations – pity, sympathy, perspective taking, etc., and motivates them. Thirdly, it is the movement in the core of subjectivity initially generated by shifting attention between the 'I' and 'we' perspectives and later 'solidified' through affect to become shifting identification, which opens up the intersubjective domain. So we can affirm that we are not only born into sociality but our sociality goes to the roots of our being as Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty have claimed.

The first part of this paper clarifies the various uses of the term 'empathy'. I begin with an overview of the various phenomena of empathy as described by social psychologist C. Daniel Batson,¹² who also usefully tracks the historical origins of these designations. I then briefly examine the analyses offered by Amy Coplan.¹³ In my view, Coplan's account maps onto various secondary manifestations of empathy which are derived from the primary empathic capacity which is the main focus of my own investigation. Coplan's approach is avowedly simulationist and as such is susceptible to all the criticisms that Gallagher has so clearly elucidated in his book *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (2005). Briefly, Gallagher proposes that *Simulation ToM*, like *Theory Theory* is overly mentalistic and that the pretend "as if" aspect remains at the level of representation and has thus ignored the most primary pre-thetic interactive level. Next, I consider how empathy is presented in the phenomenological tradition, with the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and also Dan Zahavi¹⁴ who draws on the work of a number of other phenomenologists – Husserl, Scheler, Stein, Heidegger, Henry. The notion of 'self-affection' is given particular attention. Here I consider Zahavi's use of this term and its relation to Husserl's 'sphere of ownness' – which Zahavi discusses in terms of the 'I' perspective, the 'myness' of experience for which there is always a tacit self-awareness. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's¹⁵ detailed exegesis of the notion of 'self-affection' and her critique of Zahavi's account provides a point of entry

¹² Bateson, M.C. (1979) "The epigenesis of conversational interaction : A personal account of research development". In M. Bullowa (Ed), *Before Speech : The Beginning of Human Communication*. (pp.63-77). London : Cambridge University Press

¹³ Coplan, A. (2012) "Understanding Empathy : Its Features and Effects" in Amy Coplan & Peter Goldie (eds) *Empathy : Philosophical and Psychologic Perspectives*, Published on Oxford Scholarship Online, OUP 2013. Accessed 8-8-13

¹⁴ Zahavi, Dan. (2001) "Beyond Empathy: Phenomenological Approaches to Intersubjectivity", in *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 8, No.5-7, 2001, (pp.151-167) ; (2005) *Subjectivity and Selfhood : Investigating the First-Person Perspective*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press ; (2007) "Expression and Empathy" in M.M. Ratcliffe & D.Hutto (eds), *Folk Psychology Re-Assessed*, 2007, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer pp.25-40 Google Books, Retrieved 26-1-2012

¹⁵ Sheets-Johnstone, M. (2006) "Essential clarifications of 'self-affection' and Husserl's 'sphere of ownness': First steps toward a pure phenomenology of (human) nature", *Continental Philosophy Review* (2006) 39: 361-391, DOI: 10.1007/s11007-006-9030-9 Accessed 30-8-13.

for my own interpretations which I argue find significant convergences with both these philosophers. I suggest that Sheets-Johnstone's criticisms of Zahavi are somewhat hasty and in fact both accounts can be mutually enlightening. The key to this 'reconciliation' is that the first person perspective encompasses not only the 'I' perspective but also the 'we', and that Zahavi's ontological account has not precluded movement/ animation.

My interrogations in the second part of this paper are guided by two principal questions. To begin with, what work does empathy do in this three tiered account of response? Conversely, what is the nature of intersubjective engagement when empathy is absent? By way of a preliminary answer to these questions, we can say that empathy is constitutive of the primary intersubjective level and this facilitates an immediacy, spontaneity and authenticity in any encounter. This primordial empathic responsiveness feeds into and motivates the other two levels. In regard to the secondary level with pragmatic interaction and shared contexts of attention, this will manifest as an essentially we-centric orientation, a concern for fair-play, in which the aims and well-being of the other are given equal status with the subject; with this we-centred motivating ethos others are always ends never only means. In regard to narratives, empathy facilitates imaginative participation thereby affording a deepened sensibility to image, metaphor and to the moral dilemmas of the protagonists. Finally, empathy *may* also inform the evaluative and judgment capacities at the 3rd person level, as an intuitively felt sounding-board,¹⁶ testing the evaluations and judgments against the visceral sense of truth and rightness of our embodied, embedded intuitions, thereby safeguarding against the kind of disembodied, disengaged, purely rational interactions which are ever susceptible to being co-opted for abuse and atrocity.¹⁷ The relation of empathic resonance (or dissonance) to response thus crucially informs (or misinforms) both ethical 'know-that' and ethical 'know-how'.¹⁸

Empathy and its vicissitudes

¹⁶ This serves a similar function to the 'reflective equilibrium' in various accounts of ethical justification (Rawls: 1971; Daniels: 1979, 1996; Scanlan: 2002). However, it is important to note that 'reflective equilibrium' remains in the conceptual domain, as the designation indicates.

¹⁷ To be very clear, I am not suggesting that empathy or the embodied, embedded intuitions can replace the evaluative and judgment capacities. Nor am I endorsing *unreflective* intuition as a reliable arbiter of moral value. However, I am proposing that *pre-reflective* empathy and embodied, embedded intuitions *may* serve to alert us if these evaluative and judgment capacities have been co-opted for destructive purposes as in the cases of dehumanisation and demonization.

¹⁸ Varela, Francisco, J. (1992) *Ethical know-how: Action, Wisdom and Cognition*, Stanford, Ca: Stanford University Press

Batsons's article "These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena"¹⁹ offers a very useful clarification of the various phenomena commonly given the attribution of 'empathy', highlighting the fact that there is much confusion in the discussion not least *because* of the inconsistencies in reference. Batson's taxonomy of this concept draws on an already established philosophical tradition concerned to distinguish salient features of these phenomena.²⁰ Notably, in the work of Scheler (1874-1928),²¹ there are two distinctions which Batson replicates: firstly, the distinction between access, apprehension of another's inner states and responsiveness; secondly, between 'empathic' states that remain within the sphere of the subject, wherein, in a sense, the subject's 'empathy' is parasitic on the other's suffering as opposed to where the subject, while not being totally effaced, is genuinely moved outside his/ her sphere of self-focus. Thus at the beginning of Chapter II of Scheler's *The Nature of Sympathy*, he writes:

We must first distinguish from true fellow-feeling all such attitudes as merely contribute to our *apprehending, understanding, and in general, reproducing* (emotionally) the experiences of others, including their states of feeling. Such acts have often, and quite mistakenly, been assimilated to fellow-feeling.²²

Nonetheless, Scheler observes that without the apprehension of another's inner states, fellow-feelings such as pity or compassion have no basis. However, the empathic response is not guaranteed by apprehension alone, because this "remains within the cognitive sphere, and is [thus] not a morally relevant act". Knowing and judging are insufficient according to Scheler to warrant the designation 'moral', further to which is required the responsiveness which he has termed 'fellow-feeling'. This, he asserts, exactly anticipating and rejecting mainstream *Theory of Mind*, "does not come about as the conclusion to an 'argument from analogy', nor by any projective 'empathy' or 'mimetic impulse' (Lipps)".²³

¹⁹ Batson, C.Daniel. (2009) "These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena" in *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*, Jean Decety & William Ickes (eds) Cambridge Ma: MIT Press pp 3-15

²⁰ Which Batson acknowledges in a footnote.

²¹ Scheler, Max.(1913) *The Nature of Sympathy*, trans. P.Heath 1970. Hamden, CT: Archon Books pp.8,9

²² *ibid* p.8

²³ *ibid* p.9

Zahavi endorses this insight when he writes, “empathy properly understood, is not a question of feelingly projecting oneself into the other, but rather an ability to experience behavior as expressive of mind. ie. an ability to access the life of the mind of others in their expressive behavior and meaningful action”.²⁴ However, a further step is yet required in that Zahavi here is solely referring to *access*, knowing *that* the other is minded, and what is also needed is a story about response in order for it to have any moral relevance.

Among the eight phenomena that Batson has identified, he proposes that each designation is a “conceptually distinct, stand-alone psychological state”.²⁵ In order to better distinguish these states, Batson proposes, following Scheler, that there are two questions which empathy addresses. Firstly, there is the question of access – how can we understand another’s thoughts and feelings? And secondly, there is the question of responsiveness – what allows us to respond appropriately to another’s sufferings and joys?

According to Batson, *Concepts 1- 6*, address the issue of access, knowledge of the other’s internal states, and *Concepts 7 and 8*, address the issue of response.²⁶ However, I contend that the division between access and response is a conceptual convenience, not one that bears out in reality. Underpinning the division is the assumption of disjunctions regarding the various functions of mind – cognitive, affective, perceptual etc., as opposed to whole person engagement. This division is not even so clear-cut for Batson himself, who recognizes this when he notes that *Concepts 1-7* may be antecedents to *Concept 8*. In my view, *Concept 1*, is the only version of empathy which seems to be purely cognitive and concerned solely with ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing what’. The other *Concepts*

²⁴ Zahavi, *Op. Cit.* (2007) p.37; Zahavi, *this issue*

²⁵ Batson, *Op. Cit.* (2009) p.3

²⁶ *Concept 1: Knowing Another Person’s Internal state, Including His or Her Thoughts and Feelings; Concept 2: Adopting the Posture or Matching the Neural Responses of an Observed Other*, (see - Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and the various neuroscientific findings Gordon (1995), Dimberg, Thunberg & Elmehed (2000), Hoffman (2000), Lipps (1903), Meltzoff & Moore (1997), Titchner (1909), Preston & de Waal (2002); *Concept 3: Coming to Feel as Another Person Feels*, Hume (1740/1896), Smith (1759/1853), Hatfield, Cacioppo & Rapson (1994), Zahn-Waxler, Robinson & Emde (1992), Hodges & Wegner (1997), Hoffman (2000); *Concept 4: Intuiting or Projecting Oneself into Another’s Situation* was originally inspired by what was termed ‘aesthetic empathy’, wherein artists could project themselves into the subject-matter of their work of art, Stein (1964); *Concept 5: Imagining How Another is Thinking and Feeling*, Stein (1964); *Concept 6: Imagining How One Would Think and Feel in the Other’s Place* has various historical antecedents – Adam’s Smith’s “changing places in fancy”, Mead’s “role-taking”, Povinelli’s “cognitive empathy”, Darwell’s “projective empathy” or “simulation” and Piaget’s “perspective taking” or “decentering”; *Concept 7: Feeling Distress at Witnessing Another Person’s Suffering*. To my mind, distress may arise from two very different orientations; the first is other-oriented and therefore moves naturally into *Concept 8* engendering a ‘selfless’ response; the second kind of distress is a self-oriented, parasitic distress; *Concept 8: Feeling for Another Who is Suffering*, tips the balance from empathic understanding, through responsivity towards empathic action – aimed at relieving the suffering of the other. As Batson writes, this kind of empathy refers to “an other-oriented emotional response elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone else”. He notes that in the literature this is sometimes termed “pity”, “compassion”, “sympathetic distress” or “sympathy”. But what differentiates it markedly from other versions of empathy is that it is concerned with *congruent* response and the self truly-leaves-home. The concern is entirely directed at the suffering other, neither as a projected nor introjected ‘project’ – but as a genuine other.

2-6 and 8 are interesting cross-over phenomena in that the felt understanding metamorphoses directly into 'know-how', that is, an appropriate response, and can also be retrospectively deconstructed to reveal the 'know-that', 'know-what' components and mechanisms.

And so we can say that with the exception of the second version of Batson's *Concept 7: Feeling Distress at Witnessing Another Person's Suffering* which remains in the sphere of the self, the other concepts can be regarded as stages on the way to *Concept 8: Feeling for Another Person Who is Suffering*. Not all stages are essential, rather they offer different routes and opportunities for response. The argument I pursue below is that empathy proper exists only at the primary intersubjective level, and that all the other forms – pity, sympathy, affective matching, perspective taking etc., arise at the secondary level; they disclose and are derived from this primary empathy. Amy Coplan's article "Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects" (2012) thus provides a fruitful comparison to the account I am advancing.

Coplan has offered a very useful analysis of empathy, which narrows the field to a form that she considers the most salient in terms of psychological and neuroscientific research. She suggests that it is more important to focus on the process itself rather than the various designations. Coplan outlines her mode of approach in the abstract for her article thus:

...[empathy is] a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states [both cognitive and affective] while maintaining clear self-other differentiation. Theoretical and methodological reasons are given to support this conceptualization, which focuses on three principal features of empathy: affective matching, other-oriented perspective-taking, and self-other differentiation.

Coplan endorses the view that "philosophical theories should be constrained by empirical research wherever possible, and that while we as philosophers should never accept the conclusions of empirical scientists uncritically, to ignore them is to render our work less relevant, less credible, and ultimately, less meaningful".²⁷ We can allow that this is not an unreasonable view as long as this works in both directions (*ie.* empirical research should be 'constrained'²⁸ by philosophical theory), and that

²⁷ Coplan *Op Cit.* (2012) p.6

²⁸ In both cases being 'informed' is preferable to being 'constrained'.

reductionist outcomes are eshewed so as to avoid *the mereological fallacy*.²⁹ However, what must be stressed is that the empirical scientists themselves disagree about the interpretations of the findings depending on the theoretical framework they are working within. And this is exactly where I suggest it is possible to identify a serious limitation in Coplan's account. She has adopted a simulationist approach and so her analyses pertain only to the level of secondary subjectivity/ intersubjectivity. This is particularly evident in how she describes the three essential features of empathy: (1) affective matching – “the observer's affective states are the same in kind as the target's, though they may vary in degree”; (2) Other-oriented perspective-taking – “an observer imagines a target's situation, experiences and characteristics *as though* he were the target”; (3) Self-Other differentiation – “the observer continually *represents* himself as distinct from the target”.³⁰ Coplan differentiates her proposal from those researchers who accept affective congruence as being sufficient for the designation 'empathy' and so too from other researchers who allow the observer to experience a reactive emotion such as pity or anger at the sight of the suffering other. Coplan stresses that in her account the affective states between the observer and target may differ in degree but they must be qualitatively identical.³¹ And this is of course in her view a measure of how successful the simulation processes are. And again because this is a simulation, it does not really give true access to the other's experience, only to the subject's own in a different situation.³² Furthermore, what is ignored in Coplan's account is the primary level which underpins these processes and in fact makes them viable. In contrast, primary embodied intersubjectivity is emphasized in Gallagher's account; he writes:

Primary, embodied intersubjectivity is not primary simply in developmental terms. Rather, it remains primary across all face-to-face intersubjective experiences, and it subtends the occasional and secondary intersubjective practices of explaining or predicting what other people believe, desire or intend in the practice of their own minds.³³

²⁹ Maxwell Bennett & Peter Hacker tackle this concern in their paper “The Conceptual Presuppositions of Cognitive Neuroscience” in Bennett, Dennett et al *Neuroscience and Philosophy: Brain, Mind and Language*, 2007, New York, Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press. Drawing a parallel with a quote from Aristotle, – “to say that the soul [psyche] is angry is as if one were to say that the soul weaves or builds. For it is surely better not to say that the soul pities, learns or thinks, but that a man does these with his soul” (De Anima 408b, 12-15) - Bennett and Hacker assert that this is the same as ascribing experiences to the brain – when in fact, these should be ascribed to the human as a whole. Thus the capacities for thinking, reasoning, desiring, planning and imagining cannot be reduced to neural events, but they may be co-arising. The failure to recognize this distinction is the mereological fallacy of neuroscience. p.132

³⁰ Coplan *Op. Cit.* (2012) p.6 – *my italics*

³¹ *ibid*

³² See Gallagher *Op. Cit.* (2005) and Zahavi *Op. Cit.* (2005) for critiques of simulation accounts; see Zahavi, this issue

³³ Gallagher, Shaun. (2001) “The Practice of Mind : Theory, Simulation, or Interaction”, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8/5-7, pp.83-108p. 91

While I do think Coplan is justified in being wary of congruent and reactive empathy accounts, not least due to the possibility of self-deception, I believe her account is too restrictive and inflexible and most importantly it remains in the cognitive sphere. So, let's now turn to the phenomenologists who are able to give an account of the crucial pre-cognitive primary level of empathy.

Merleau-Ponty and empathy

*[that the reason why] ... the compresence of my "consciousness" and my "body" is extended into the compresence of myself and the other person, in that the "I am able to" and the "the other person exists" belong here and now to the same world, that the body proper is a premonition of the other person, the Einfühlung (empathy) an echo of my incarnation, and that a flash of meaning makes them substitutable in the absolute presence of origins.*³⁴

Merleau-Ponty develops the direction of his thought on empathy in response to the accounts of Husserl, Scheler and Stein, and upholds a tacit acknowledgement of these intellectual debts by retaining in his discussions the German term "*Einfühlung*".³⁵ Although he does not tackle this concept extensively in any thematic way, like his ethics, it is implicit in his central ideas and conspicuous in a few select and highly suggestive assertions, such as the following. He proposes that "my perceptual opening... claims no monopoly of being ... [and that] ... the whole riddle of *Einfühlung* lies in its initial, "esthesiological" phase; and it is solved there because it is a perception... it is never a matter of anything but co-perception".³⁶ We see here, that Merleau-Ponty is challenging the unwarranted tendency of theorists of empathy to attribute to empathy a substantive reality, as a special state apart from subjectivity itself, purely on the grounds that it is possible to conceptualize it in this way; mistaking the map for the territory. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty is here once again anticipating the neuroscientific research which shows that perception is affectively informed,³⁷ and so

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, M. *Signs*, trans. Librarie Gallimard (1964), Evanston, Illinois:Northwestern University Press, p.175; *Signes* (1960) Paris: Éditions Gallimard, p.221

³⁵ *Einfühlung* literally, "feeling one's way into" was originally used in German aesthetics in the late 19th century, which itself was derived from the Greek "empathia" which is translated as "passion, state of emotion". It was first translated into English as "empathy" by Titchener (1909), after which it came into common usage in American psychological research. So it would seem that the original sense has become confused and mixed with the word "sympathy". "Sympathie" (fr) is "affinity between certain things"; the Latin "sympathia" is "community of feeling"; and the Greek "sympatheia" is "Fellow-feeling". Colwyn Trevarthen has written most cogently on this confusion and he proposes that "the word 'sympathy' clearly conveys best the core sense of intersubjective awareness of agency and emotion that works reciprocally between persons" (2012: 466). With apologies to Trevarthen, I will be using the term "empathy" as an umbrella term to encompass all these renderings, which are I propose (perhaps with the exception of the original Greek) able to capture the sense of affective reversibility.

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, M. *Op. Cit.* (1964) p.170; *Op.Cit.* (1960) p.217

³⁷ Meltzoff, A. & Moore, M. (1995) "Infants' understanding of people and things: from body imitation to folk psychology in – J.Burmudez, A.Marcel & N.Eilan (eds) *The Body and the Self*, Cambridge, M.A: MIT/ Bradford Press. pp.53-54 ; Adolphs, R. et al, (2000) "A Role for Somatosensory Cortexes in the Visual Recognition of Emotion as Revealed by Three-Dimensional Lesion Mapping" (2000) *Journal of Neuroscience*, 20(7):2683-2690 sourced from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/folkpsych-simulation/> retrieved 28-12-11; Gallagher, S. & Hutto, D. (2008) "Understanding Others Through Primary Interaction and Narrative Practice" in

when there is co-perception there is also empathy; perception, affect and empathy are co-arising modes within a single process of engaging with the world and others. Empathy is essential to Merleau-Ponty for two reasons; because it bridges the affective gap between subjects and because it thereby motivates response. So, just as Merleau-Ponty asserted that he never conceived of the subject as being anything other than an ethical subject,³⁸ so too we can say that he never conceived of perception as being anything other than an affectively informed perception. Within Merleau-Ponty's interworld, the intersubjective encounter is not that of two self-enclosed interiorities negotiating across a divide and confronted only with impenetrable exteriorities. Rather, he challenges the purported absolute disjunction of interiority/ exteriority and asserts that much more is actually given to us in the supposed exteriority of the Other. He writes:

We must reject the prejudice which makes "inner realities" out of love, hate or anger, leaving them accessible to one single witness: the person who feels them. Anger, shame, hate, and love are not psychic facts hidden at the bottom of another's consciousness: they are types of behavior or styles of conduct which are visible from the outside. They exist on this face or in those gestures, not hidden behind them.³⁹

We can say in the same manner it is necessary to reject the prejudice that makes empathy an inner reality, a special state apart from subjectivity/ intersubjectivity, accessible only to the experiencing subject. Rather empathy is a relational manner of being, a general orientation towards the world and others, reflected in types of behavior and styles of conduct. In this way *access* is already *response*, and empathy, affective reversibility, like perception, rationality and imagination is an essential mode of intentionality. As with all the intentional capacities, empathic responsiveness is not an all-or-nothing capacity; it in fact may differ significantly not only between subjects in terms of scope and force but also across differing contexts.

The Shared Mind: Perspectives on Intersubjectivity, (eds) J.Zlatev, T.Racine, C.Sinha, E.Itkonen, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Retrieved 28th December 2011; Slaby, J. (2007) "Affective Intentionality and the Feeling Body", Springer Science and Business Media. <http://fu-berlin.academia.edu/JanSlaby/Papers/440428/Affective-Intentionality-and-the-Feeling-Body> Retrieved 20-2-2012; Fuchs, T. (2005) "Delusional Mood and Delusional Perception – A Phenomenological Analysis", *Psychopathology* 2005 ;38 :133-139. Fuchs notes "It was Erwin Strauss [20; p.151] who aptly distinguished a 'pathic' and a 'gnostic' component in perception..." p.135

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, M. *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*. Trans. James. Edie (1964) Evanston: Northwestern University Press p.30

³⁹ Merleau-Ponty (1948, *fr*) *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans, Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus, (1970) Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press pp.52-53

In everyday social interaction, the general expectation is that empathy is the rule and that lack of empathy, insensitive or ruthless behavior, are exceptional and reprehensible,⁴⁰ but less reprehensible if the subject is constitutionally damaged (due to ASD, psychopathology, abusive or negligent parenting, etc.,) or blocked (by top-down processes – destructive ideologies, conditioning etc.,). Thus we have the commonly held view that even in the most hardened criminal, there is a seed of compassion waiting for the suitable conditions so as to sprout and grow. The tales of redemption in religious and secular literature are among the most well-loved, testifying to the deep significance empathy and fellow-feeling have in our lives. In the drive for redemption, there is also the social imperative to bring the rogue individual back into the 'fold', simultaneously allaying fears of further destructive behaviour and reinforcing solidarity. The unredeemable remains a constant threat, as they cannot be called to account, being beyond the usual social, ethical constraints and sensibilities.

As we know well, we and others regularly get it wrong – empathy breaks down or is actively annulled. The other may deceive, be empathically elusive, be the 'wrong' recipient for empathy or we may misread the other due to our own agendas, we may self-deceive as to our real motives. Thus it is clear that empathic responsiveness is not guaranteed and is never an all or nothing relation, it requires constant feeling attention, care, refinements and recalibrations so as to attain a workable degree of empathic resonance, where both one feels one understands and the other feels understood.

One of the key contributors to current interrogations of empathy and intersubjectivity is Dan Zahavi whose scholarship ranges from phenomenology, psycho-pathology to neuroscience. It is important to note that Zahavi, while recognizing the value of neuroscience as an interrogative lens, is always mindful of avoiding the reductionism to which some philosophers have succumbed.⁴¹ Zahavi is a 'fast-moving target', always extending the reach of his philosophical grasp, so that it is a challenge to keep up with the particular focus of his most recent investigations. That being said, the threads of concern running through his various analyses are both coherent and identifiable. Below I track the

⁴⁰ I propose that the reason why there is such a strong expectation of reciprocity in regard to empathic behaviour is that just as with perception – even if the perceptive relation is asymmetrical and non-reciprocal – the important point is that the other defines an external vantage on the self. So too with empathy – regardless of non-reciprocity, the other still nonetheless defines an external potentially affectively reciprocal vantage on the self. Furthermore, 'fellow-feeling'/ empathy, as I am arguing, is constitutive of subjectivity.

⁴¹ See earlier footnote this paper, Bennett & Hacker pp.8 & 9

trajectory of his analyses on empathy, emphasizing the aspects which support the account I am promoting.

Zahavi on Empathy and Intersubjectivity

In his paper “Beyond Empathy: Phenomenological Approaches to Intersubjectivity”,⁴² Zahavi notes that empathic intentionality is often regarded as being *the* only account of intersubjectivity offered in the phenomenological tradition which has resolutely rejected the argument from analogy and any accounts exclusively based on representations and inference. Intersubjectivity, in fact, cuts across a number of intentional domains – thetic intentionality, sensori-motor intentionality, perceptual intentionality, linguistic intentionality, and also empathic intentionality; it is clear that none of these can be taken in isolation, they must be examined as a holistic, overlapping, feedback system involving whole persons.

Zahavi draws on a number of key analyses from the phenomenological tradition that complement and illuminate the account he is promoting. He begins with Heidegger’s analyses of artifacts as testaments to our intersubjective existence, that artifacts are not mere objects in the world, but bear witness to the lives of the creators and users. Then he moves on to discuss Heidegger’s pivotal notions *Dasein* and *Mitsein* – being-there and being-with respectively; that beings are essentially social from birth, they are born into a sociality of meanings and references. Thus, at first glance, it appears that any appeals to empathy are entirely superfluous as *Dasein* and *Mitsein* clearly establish the ontological grounds for intersubjective relations – and as Zahavi notes “Under normal circumstances [we do in fact] understand each other well enough through our shared engagement in the common world, and it is only if this understanding for some reason breaks down, that something like empathy becomes relevant”.⁴³ However, as Zahavi points out, the very fact that there can be a break-down in empathic relations attests to there being a pre-existing empathy, and this belongs to both *Dasein* and *Mitsein*. Husserl and Merleau-Ponty have also pursued similar lines of argument to Heidegger, and as Zahavi notes, they have extended the analyses beyond “the social character of tool-use” to include the very

⁴² Zahavi, *Op.Cit.* (2001)

⁴³ Zahavi *Op.Cit.*, (2001) p.155

“public nature of perceptual objects” in general, and so to intentionality as a relation to the world itself.⁴⁴

Zahavi identifies an important quote pertaining to this issue in Husserl’s unpublished manuscript C.17, which reads – “When empathy occurs, is perhaps community, intersubjectivity, likewise already there, and does empathy then merely accomplish the disclosure of it? (Ms.C, 17 84b)”.⁴⁵ Husserl, according to Zahavi, affirms this. This question of whether empathy functions solely to disclose is one that certainly could be attributed to Husserl on the basis of the above quote. However, the point that Zahavi makes is that Husserl is emphasizing the fact *that empathy is lived largely unreflectively* and that it is only when empathy breaks down that we reflectively capture the phenomena of empathy. The very fact that we *do* understand each other well enough testifies to empathy being primary, therefore pre-existing any break-down; and so empathy is intrinsic to the original engagement, to the original relation. I propose we need to emphasize that not only is empathy lived largely unreflectively, but more importantly it is for the most part lived pre-reflectively; empathy reveals not only an original relation but also an original orientation; empathy is necessary and constitutive of primary subjectivity.

In his article “Beyond Empathy”, Zahavi asserts that the empathy account⁴⁶ is only able “to account for one of the aspects of intersubjectivity, and that it is debatable whether this aspect is the most crucial one. In short, it remains questionable whether a theory of empathy can constitute the base and centre of a theory of intersubjectivity”.⁴⁷ Zahavi, contests the claim that the phenomenological approach to intersubjectivity is centred purely on empathy as “a unique and irreducible form of intentionality”⁴⁸ alongside the intentional modes of perception, imagination and memory. Zahavi insists it is necessary to go beyond empathy because as he writes:

...empathy understood as *a thematic encounter with a concrete other* is either taken to be a derived rather than a fundamental form of intersubjectivity – because it is taken to disclose

⁴⁴ Zahavi *Op.Cit.*, (2001) p.155

⁴⁵ Zahavi *Op.Cit.*, (2001) p.156

⁴⁶ *The empathy account* refers to accounts based on the work of both Max Scheler and Edith Stein. That Scheler’s work is titled *The Nature of Sympathy* and Stein’s *On the Problem of Empathy* already signals the complications at this early stage in the precise use of terms to cover affectively responsive intersubjective engagements. Nonetheless, both were developed in rejection of the earlier prevailing account of intersubjectivity – *the Argument from Analogy*.

⁴⁷ Zahavi, *Op.Cit.* (2001) p.165

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p.153

rather than establish intersubjectivity – or because there are aspects of the problem of intersubjectivity which simply cannot be addressed as long as one remains narrowly focused on empathy.⁴⁹

Zahavi's assessment is exactly on target.⁵⁰ We can then say that empathy is a necessary but not sufficient condition in the account of subjectivity/ intersubjectivity. However, while I acknowledge that empathy is not the full story across the subjective/ intersubjective levels, it is nonetheless essential to go beyond approaches which remain focused purely on access so as to account for response; and if primary access is responsive, the only contender capable of delivering this in my view is empathy. Empathy, I argue, is simply affective reversibility. It is the affective reversibility internal to the subject, self-affection,⁵¹ which lays the grounds for affective reversibility between subjects.

Having sketched the overall domain and issues concerned with the notion of empathy, I would like to examine in detail the role that the complementary notions of affective reversibility, self-affection and the primordial 'we' play in revealing primary subjectivity/ intersubjectivity before turning my attention to how empathy transforms across Trevarthen's other two intersubjective levels.

Primary Intersubjectivity: Affective reversibility, self-affection and the "primordial we"

So what work does empathy do at this primary level?⁵² And how does it achieve this 'work'? *Primary Subjectivity/ Intersubjectivity* encompasses both the 'I' perspective and the 'we' perspective.⁵³ If the identification remains fixedly on the 'I', the orientation is dominated by individualism and competition. If this sense of subjectivity/ intersubjectivity embraces the 'we', the values become collective ones and the orientation is characterized by cooperation. The more the circle of 'we' is widened, the more empathically available is the subject to other sentient beings.

⁴⁹ *ibid*, pp 153& 154

⁵⁰ At this point (2001) Zahavi's philosophical interests are directed towards the more cognitively demanding aspects of intersubjectivity. More recently it would seem that he has returned to an examination of the first person perspective and specifically the "we – perspective". See Zahavi, D. (2013) "Empathy, emotional sharing and we-intentionality" – abstract for conference *The Phenomenology of Sociality*, University College, Dublin May 8 – 10, 2013. Accessed 30-6-13

⁵¹ My use of the term 'self-affection' is consistent with, but not identical to, the interpretations offered by Zahavi (1999; 2005) and Sheets-Johnstone (2006).

⁵² The three levels of subjectivity/ intersubjectivity – primary, secondary and tertiary – refer to the seminal work of Colwyn Trevarthen, *Op. Cit.* (1998).

⁵³ Merleau-Ponty, M. "The Philosopher and his Shadow" in *Signs*, trans. Librarie Gallimard (1964), Evanston, Illinois:Northwestern University Press p.175

What is it that underwrites these anticipations of the other? It is not only the reversibility of the touching/ touched within the embodied subject which discloses an 'otherness' at the core of the subject, but also the affective reversibility internal to the subject – the self-affection, the empathy or fellow-feeling within the self. The first person perspective has both the sense of 'I', 'me', 'myself' and 'we', 'us', 'ourselves' – the first person has intrinsic to its very structure the shifting identification between the 'I' and 'we' perspectives.⁵⁴

That otherness is constitutive of the self, so that openness to the other is built-in, has been clearly demonstrated through the phenomenological analyses and also through significant empirical findings in neuroscience.⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty's reversibility thesis sets out the arguments for various levels of alterity – within the body-subject; between the subject and things; and also between subjects. In another paper "Does the Reversibility thesis deliver all that Merleau-Ponty claims it can?"⁵⁶ I address the criticisms of this thesis. Briefly, the first criticism is that the asymmetry in some of the reversible relations undermine the thesis. The second related criticism is that Merleau-Ponty's Other does not meet the requirement of irreducibility. I have argued that asymmetry in fact guarantees that Merleau-Ponty's project does not collapse into solipsism and that reversibility needs to be understood as a dialectical reversibility and not a literal, mechanical one. In this way the irreducibility requirement is satisfied and there is no fusion.

What is relevant to our discussions here is that there is an affective dimension to these modes of alterity and again I propose that these affective relations are reversible and irreducible; and again there is no fusion. *Within the subject*, the shifting affective identification between the 'I' and 'we' never coincides in non-pathological cases. The 'I' identifies as one among others, as belonging, whether at the level of family, community, species or at its most expanded as one sentient being among others. I have proposed that the notions empathy, affective reversibility and 'self-affection' all elucidate a central feature of primary intersubjectivity. I wish now to turn to Sheets-Johnstone's elaborations of

⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (1962) reprint – (2006) London: Routledge Kegan Paul (PP: 405-407, PP:470-472, PP: 466-468) Imbalances between these perspectives may I propose lay the grounds for sociopathology and psychopathology.

⁵⁵ Gallagher (2005), Zahavi (2005), Fuchs (2008) offer thorough accounts of both the phenomenology and the neuroscience.

⁵⁶ Daly, Anya. (2013) "Does the Reversibility Thesis deliver all that Merleau-Ponty claims it can?", *European Journal of Philosophy* (forthcoming)

the notion of 'self-affection', and in particular her critical engagement with Zahavi around this notion.⁵⁷

Sheets-Johnstone while offering a generally appreciative assessment of Zahavi's analyses nonetheless criticizes him at regular junctures.⁵⁸ I would like to use two of these criticisms from Sheets-Johnstone along with some key quotes concerning 'self-affection' from Zahavi to launch my own interpretations. In my view, Zahavi's account does not preclude animation/ movement as Sheets-Johnstone argues and the supposed paradoxicality of Zahavi's 'myness' is revealed as being less paradoxical. *Criticism 1*: "...that reversibility, exemplified in the 'one hand touching the other' is not only misguided but straightaway distracting: it summarily diverts attention away from the foundational phenomena of animation".⁵⁹ *Criticism 2*: Sheets-Johnstone takes issue with Zahavi's account of first person givenness. She proposes that there is a circularity in Zahavi's explication of the 'myness' of experience. She further proposes that Zahavi's claim that if "[t]he myness is not something attended to; it simply figures as a subtle background presence" and this she proposes is paradoxical.⁶⁰ Below, I examine these criticisms and find that while they point to issues that warrant further explication, they do not in the end hit the mark.

Zahavi's exegesis of the notion of 'self-affection' draws on Husserl's distinction between reflective self-awareness and pre-reflective self-awareness. "I can thematize myself because I am already passively self-aware; I can grasp myself because I am already affected by myself. (HUA 6/111; 15/78, 120)".⁶¹ Zahavi notes that Husserl had anticipated and rejected criticisms such as those of Derrida's - that 'self-affection' would require either an absence or unconsciousness at the core of subjectivity, because it seems to imply that there is something which affects and another something that is affected. Zahavi writes:

Is it possible to specify the nature of this immediate self-givenness any further? Regrettably, Husserl was not forthcoming with details..... Pre-reflective self-awareness has an internal differentiation and articulation. Husserl insisted that only this fact can explain the possibility of temporal self-awareness, of reflection and recollection...⁶²

⁵⁷ Sheets-Johnstone, *Op. Cit.* (2006)

⁵⁸ *ibid*, pp.362, 363, 364, 365, 366, 376 etc.,

⁵⁹ *ibid*, p.371

⁶⁰ *ibid*, p. 376

⁶¹ Zahavi, *Op Cit* (2005), p.54

⁶² *ibid*, pp.71 & 72

It is my contention that this internal differentiation and articulation is that of the shifting attention between the 'I' perspective and the 'we' perspective. Not only can this then illuminate temporal self-awareness⁶³ but also the inner movement, the animation at the heart of subjectivity. And so the model of the reversible touching/ touched can be transposed into affective reversibility internal to the subject, as the 'light' attentional shifting between the 'I' and 'we' becomes affectively intensified to engender a constantly shifting identification between the 'I' and 'we' perspectives. And so contrary to Sheets-Johnstone, we can say that when the 'I' is in focus, the 'we' shifts into background awareness and vice versa, in the same manner as Merleau-Ponty has articulated the shifting dynamics of perception between figure and background. Sheets-Johnstone has criticized Zahavi for his assertion that when the 'mineness' is not attended to, it nonetheless remains "as a subtle background presence".⁶⁴ Rather, Sheets-Johnstone proposes that, "if one analyzes everyday experience phenomenologically, one finds that the non-attended "subtle background presence" is not a *my* but *the animate body*".⁶⁵ Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, we can correct Sheets-Johnstone; it is not *the animate body*, but *my animate body*, "... not that possible body which we may legitimately think of as an information machine but this actual body I call *mine*, this sentinel standing quietly at the command of *my* words and *my* acts...".⁶⁶ The experience of *myness* is intrinsically embodied; I am always *this side of my body*.

Along with *ipseity*, 'myness', there is an essential 'ourness' in primary subjectivity. Zahavi has already in his book *Self-Awareness and Alterity* (1999) pointed to this dynamism in subjectivity, he writes: "Self-affection understood as the process of affecting and being affected is not the rigid self-identity of an object, but a subjective movement best described as the immanent, nonhorizontal, and nonecstatic self-temporalization of subjectivity".⁶⁷ In my view, the above discussion while being only a preliminary foray into this territory, nonetheless should dispel the concerns that Sheets-Johnstone

⁶³ Merleau-Ponty's Chapter "Temporality" in *The Phenomenology of Perception* pp. 410 – 433; pp477 - 503 and; "time is 'the affecting of self by self'; * what exerts the effect is time as a thrust and a passing towards a future: what is affected is time as an unfolded series of presents: the affecting agent and affected recipient are one, because the thrust of time is nothing but the transition from one present to another. This *ek-stase*, this projection of an indivisible power into an outcome which is already present to it, is subjectivity" (PP:495). * footnote - The expression is applied by Kant to the *Gemüt*. Heidegger transfers it to time: 'Die Zeit is ihren Wesen nach reine Affektion ihrer selbst.' *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, pp.180-1

⁶⁴ Zahavi *Op. Cit.* (2005) p.124

⁶⁵ Sheets-Johnstone *Op. Cit.* (2006) p.376

⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind* (1968) in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader : Philosophy and Painting*, Ed. Galen A. Johnson, trans.ed. Michael B.Smith, (1993) Evanston: Northwestern University Press p.122 *my italics*

⁶⁷ Zahavi, D. (1999) *Self-Awareness and Alterity : A Phenomenological Investigation*, Evanston, IL : Northwestern University Press, p.114

raises regarding the need for “clarifications by way of experiential analyses” for both subjective *movement* and self-temporalization.⁶⁸

How is affective reversibility established *between subjects*? We could say that as soon as contact is established between subjects, apprehension of an-Other is immediately affectively charged, although the expression of this affective charge is not guaranteed. At the subjective pole, there may be withdrawal of empathic engagement, wherein the subject withdraws into their ‘thinking being’, either investing all their attention on the achievement of a pragmatic task, or blocking the initial response with top-down processes. In the first, we know this well in certain professions which require that empathic susceptibility be shut-down so as to enhance efficacy, such as in the case of a surgeon or a bomb disposal expert – empathy is counterproductive and the task becomes all-consuming. In the second, this is apparent in cases where the subject is no longer empathically available in advance, due to ideology or conditioning. The ‘other’ has already been stripped of empathic and ethical significance due to either being stripped of their humanity (dehumanization) or being accredited with a repugnant status (demonization). Torture thus exploits both mechanisms, ensuring that the torturer is immune to any appeals to his/ her ‘fellow-feeling’.

Merleau-Ponty’s re-interpretation of Sartre’s analysis of the *Gaze* illustrates this reduced relation:

[In the gaze] the other person transforms me into an object and denies me, I transform him into an object and deny him, it is asserted. In fact, the other’s gaze transforms me into an object and mine him, *only* if both of us withdraw into the core of our *thinking nature*, if we both make ourselves into *an inhuman gaze*, if each of us feels his actions to be not taken up and understood, but observed as if they were an insect’s.⁶⁹

How can a human achieve such an inhuman gaze, so as to not be empathically available? In terms of development, it is known that the extent of myelination in the pre-frontal areas determines the capacity to inhibit response⁷⁰ and this would cut both ways, in facilitating self-regulation so that destructive behavior is controlled, but also in regulating empathic availability. In regards to autism, it has been found that there is lower activation in the brain areas with mirror neurons (the inferior frontal

⁶⁸ Sheets-Johnstone, *Op Cit*, (2006), p.364

⁶⁹ Merleau-Ponty, M. *The Phenomenology of Perception*, (1962:360-361, 2006:420, 1945:418-419) *my italics*

⁷⁰ Restak, Richard. (2002) *The Secret Life of the Brain*, Dana Press and Joseph Henry Press; Gied, J., J. Blumenthal, N. Jeffries, F. Castellanos, H.Lieu, A. Ijdenbos, T. Paus, A. Evans & J.Rapoport, “Brain development during childhood and adolescence: A longitudinal MRI Study”, *Nature Neuroscience* 2 (10) pp. 861-863

gyrus pars opercularis) and also in the emotion centres (the insula and the amygdala).⁷¹ Thus in both these instances, it is clearly a matter of constitutional deficiency whereas what would be relevant for ethical considerations is the case of determining, of willing oneself, not to be empathically available – the deployment of top-down processes.

I mentioned earlier that it is through the top-down strategies of dehumanization and demonization that the torturer maintains his absolute imperviousness to his victim's suffering. The torturer has withdrawn into his thinking nature, closed down affective responsiveness in advance by objectifying the victim and the victim's pain. So too, with sexual predators, the prey is reduced to a means for the predator's sexual gratification, they no longer have status as a person, as a genuine Other. The lateral relationality central to primary intersubjectivity has in both instances been annulled, and both perpetrators have shut down affective responsiveness in favour of the gratifications of power.

Primary empathy is affective reversibility, which renders us susceptible to another's gaze, to their voice, to their touch. It establishes a basis of responsiveness and receptivity to others, without which interactions at the secondary level would remain mechanical and cerebral, never attaining warmth, spontaneity and virtuosity. So too at the tertiary level, without primary empathic responsiveness, subjects become vulnerable to the lure of dubious ideologies, to the seductions of power and all its corruptions.

Secondary Intersubjectivity and empathic contributions

Secondary Intersubjectivity relates to 2nd person interactions, and these may be "you" singular or "you" plural interactions. Developmentally, this shift occurs around nine months, when "cooperative task performance becomes possible and attractive for the infant, who now shows 'person-person-object' awareness".⁷² At this level, the focus is one of joint attention and shared interest, whether this be a pragmatic task, a shared perceptual experience, dialogue or narrative involvement (in the beginning demonstrated in proto-conversational games). Subjects are alongside each other, and their focused attention is directed beyond them, but implicit in this secondary engagement are both the recognition of the self and the other as distinct collaborators, as counterparts, as competitors, as

⁷¹ Eisenberg, Nancy & Natalie D.Eggum. "Empathic Responding: Sympathy and Personal Distress," in *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*, Jean Decety & William Ickes (eds), 2009 Cambridge Ma: MIT Press pp.76& 77

⁷² Trevarthen, *Op. Cit.* (1998) p.18

interlocutors and the recognition of the context. We must recall Merleau-Ponty's discussions regarding attention, that the simplest perception is of figure on a background, and that attention is able to shift between different figures as well as shift between focused attention (the figure) and diffuse attention (the background). Here the attention shifts between self, other, the object of shared attention and the context - distinguishing, aligning, rejecting, affirming, opposing, assisting, teasing, 'showing off', agreeing, disagreeing, questioning, responding and turn-taking – in an endless play; as Merleau-Ponty has said we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity.⁷³

Not only do these reciprocal exchanges guarantee a shared world, but also it is through pragmatic or communicative reciprocity from person to person, in relation to an object, that psycho-social development is achieved. Underlying the efficacy of such interactions is empathic attunement, without which the exchanges become awkward and frustrating. This developmental process beginning around nine months continues to develop throughout the entire life of a person and some we know never become very skilled in these exchanges. Trevarthen points again to parenting being the most significant factor and he suggests that "normal, happy, proto-conversational games need mutual awareness and purposeful replies, with both parties in immediate sympathetic contact" if this development is to be negotiated successfully.⁷⁴ Mary Bateson's work across the domains of ethology and developmental psychology offers much to support such claims.⁷⁵

At this secondary level, the derivative empathic modes of sympathy, pity, projective empathy, perspective taking, decentering, come into play and also the related intersubjective experiences of 'fair play', blame, shame, guilt, jealousy, pride and trust become relevant. And so, it is evident how from a fundamental empathic responsiveness, through these derivative modes that an ethical subject becomes possible.

Tertiary intersubjectivity - empathy as ethical touchstone

⁷³ "In the absence of reciprocity there is no alter ego, since the world of the one then takes in completely that of the other, so that one feels disinherited in favour of the other..... co-existence must in all cases be experienced on both sides." *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1962:357; 2006:416, 1945:415)

⁷⁴ Trevarthen, *Op Cit* (1998), p.34 (Trevarthen, 1984b)

⁷⁵ Bateson, M.C. (1979) "The epigenesis of conversational interaction : A personal account of research development". In M. Bullowa (Ed), *Before Speech : The Beginning of Human Communication*. (pp.63-77). London : Cambridge University Press

Tertiary intersubjectivity concerns 3rd person engagements, involving *he, she, it* or *they*; at this level, the self and others become public representations, able to be discussed and judged by other parties. This psychological development usually begins around twenty months and is generally established by four years. It is this development which *theory theorists* propose indicates that subjects have attained a ToM, and can infer the cognitive states of others;⁷⁶ that others have beliefs, desires, imaginings different from the subject herself; that others are minded. So too, at this stage, the child becomes aware of its public image and correlatively how to use this to gain what is desired; and so manipulation, pretense and deception now come into play.⁷⁷

The collaborations at this level may take the form of complex projects involving more than two people, or the discussion of thoughts and feelings; or through narratives, the telling, the listening, the confirming of socio-cultural mores and values. It is at this level that language attains especial significance as the vehicle whereby the past and future are presented, as explanations and predictions, where selves and others learn about the consequences of choices and actions, about the possibilities and realities of change, and that change opens up the future to a potentially different way of being, of behaving and so invites negotiation, appraisal, reappraisal and planning. This tertiary level engages specifically the cognitive capacities and so engenders an intrinsic distanciation, an ability to stand back, evaluate and to appraise. And it is when this kind of appraisal if not grounded in the body and informed by empathy becomes dangerous in that it is able to be co-opted for self-serving, abusive and destructive behavior.⁷⁸ I have discussed above the mechanisms of dehumanization and demonization which not only disembodiment engagement but also block off empathic availability. Merleau-Ponty discusses the dangers and paradox of such a retreat into one's thinking core:

... against the social world I can always avail myself of my sensible nature, close my eyes, stop up my ears, live as a stranger in society, treat others, ceremonies and institutions as mere arrangements of colour and light, and strip them of all their human significance. Against the

⁷⁶ Proponents of the *Theory Theory* school of thought include Simon Baron-Cohen (1995) *An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind*, Boston : MIT Press, Alison Gopnik & A. Meltzoff, (1998) *Words, Thoughts and Theories*, Boston: MIT Press; H. Wellman(1990) *The Child's Theory of Mind*, Boston : MIT Press; Baron-Cohen, Simon (2001) "Theory of mind in normal development and autism" in *Prisme* , 34, pp174-183

⁷⁷ Leslie, A.M. (1987) "Pretense and representation: the origins of 'Theory of Mind'" *Psychological Review*, 94, pp.412-426; Currie, G & I Ravenscroft, (1992) *Meeting of Minds: thought, perception and imagination*, Oxford : Oxford University Press

⁷⁸ Thomas Fuchs and his team in the psychiatric department, University of Heidelberg, have done much to illuminate the role of perception and embodiment in psychopathology. See Fuchs *Op. Cit.* (2005); Fuchs, T. & J. Schlimme (2009) "Embodiment and Psychopathology : A Phenomenological Perspective" *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*, 2009, 22 :570-575

natural world I can always have recourse to the thinking nature and entertain doubts about each perception taken on its own.... But I can fly from being only into being...⁷⁹

The scope for inhumanity, by retreating into ones thinking core, by observing others as mere objects through *the inhuman gaze*, becomes possible at this tertiary level, but at the same time, paradoxically, it undercuts itself because of the impossibility of totally escaping from one's humanity. Merleau-Ponty explains that "even the 'indefinite refusal to be anything at all' (Valery) assumes something which is refused and in relation to which the subject holds himself apart. I must choose between others and myself, it is said. But we choose one against the other, and thus assert both".⁸⁰ Thus he proposes the social world cannot be reduced to an object or even the sum of objects, but rather it exists as "a permanent field or dimension of existence" exactly in the same way in that we are always situated relative to the world, and so any 'turning away', any rejection of sociality is ultimately self-defeating. It is impossible to deny ones core nature indefinitely – the interdependence that goes to the heart of our being.⁸¹

Nonetheless, although it is impossible to escape from one's humanity absolutely and forever, top-down processes from this tertiary level can serve to block or corrupt primary empathy, through the mechanisms of dehumanization and demonization, and so humans have repeatedly throughout history done and continue to do horrible things to each other. This is exactly why we seek to constrain destructive individuals in advance through political structures and *post facto* through legal structures. Intersubjective concerns at this tertiary level are those of equality, justice, responsibility and ethics. It is important to remember, however, that this tertiary level is informed by the secondary level and is grounded in the primary wherein empathy is paramount. So as to safe-guard against destructiveness the primary identification needs to shift from the 'I' to the 'we', from individualistic consciousness to we-centred consciousness. The shared concerns of justice and responsibility at the tertiary level, return us full circle to the primary intersubjective level, wherein subjectivity is an intersubjectivity, wherein the 'I' belongs inherently to the 'we', and wherein fellow-feeling, 'self-affection' and empathy are constitutive.

⁷⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1962:360, 2006:419, 1945:418)

⁸⁰ *ibid* (1962:360, 2006:419, 1945:418)

⁸¹ This refers to the extremely well-known central aim of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical project – to establish a non-dualist ontology, also known as a relational ontology.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to offer an architectonic of the phenomenon of empathy by situating the various experiences commonly given the attribution 'empathy' at the appropriate level according to Trevarthen's three tiered account of subjectivity/ intersubjectivity. In this way, the confusions around the terminology and processes related to empathy are dispelled. Furthermore, I have used Gallagher's *Interaction Theory* of primary intersubjectivity along with Merleau-Ponty's reversibility thesis to argue for an affective reversibility across the various levels, paying particular attention to the primary level of subjectivity/ intersubjectivity. And so there is a simultaneous and parallel mapping of both intersubjective access and response across the three levels.

Empathy, I have argued in agreement with Zahavi, does not merely disclose intersubjectivity, nor is it derived on the basis of intersubjectivity. Rather, empathy is constitutive of subjectivity. Husserl's assertions that subjectivity is an intersubjectivity, can thus be appreciated as having an essential affective dimension. It is the movement, the 'self-affection' in the core of subjectivity initially generated by shifting attention between the 'I' and 'we' perspectives and later 'solidified' through affect to become shifting identification, which opens up the intersubjective domain. Empathy as an essential intentional mode of subjectivity/ intersubjectivity ensures that relations between sentient beings go beyond the mere knowledge of others so as to infuse our interactions with meaning. Primordial empathic responsiveness drives psycho-social development and serves as a touchstone for the more cognitive intersubjective modes and metadiscursive practices, ensuring thus that subjects remain positively connected with others and the shared world. The denial of empathic responsiveness is paradoxical in the same way as self-deception is paradoxical. In order to self-deceive, the self must know very precisely that which it is deceiving itself about so as to effectively self-deceive and so paradoxically the self knows and doesn't know at the same time. So too with empathy, the self in denying empathic responsiveness by fixing the other in an *inhuman gaze*, paradoxically is acutely aware of the humanity of the other which the *inhuman gaze* seeks to annul, and the actions are thus very precisely targeted to achieve this dehumanization. In this way also, we can understand how harming another simultaneously harms the self, because the we-centredness at the core of subjectivity is shrunk and constricted to the solitary 'I'. We know in our interactions that we tend to shrink from such shriveled selves and are conversely drawn to expansive selves. Integral to empathy is not only its relationality, but also the implicit egalitarian ethos of this interdependent 'we-centred' core

subjectivity. In this way, primary empathy lays the grounds for the possibility of all ethical practice. Without empathy, we could say with the amoralist – why bother to be moral?

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