

## Empathy and Direct Social Perception: A Phenomenological Proposal

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**Abstract** Quite a number of the philosophical arguments and objections currently being launched against simulation (ST) based and theory-theory (TT) based approaches to mindreading have a phenomenological heritage in that they draw on ideas found in the work of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Stein, Gurwitsch, Scheler and Schutz. Within the last couple of years, a number of ST and TT proponents have started to react and respond to what one for the sake of simplicity might call the phenomenological proposal (PP). This paper addresses some of these critical responses, and distinguishes—in the process—substantive disagreements from terminological issues and other issues that are symptomatic of different research agendas. It does so by focusing specifically upon some objections made by Pierre Jacob. These epitomize the kinds of concerns that are being raised about PP at the moment, and thus facilitate a reply on behalf of PP that also applies more generally.

Quite a number of the philosophical arguments and objections currently being launched against simulation (ST) based and theory-theory (TT) based approaches to mindreading have a phenomenological heritage in that they draw on ideas found in the work of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Stein, Gurwitsch, Scheler and Schutz (Thompson 2001; Zahavi 2005; Gallagher 2005; Ratcliffe 2007; Overgaard 2007; Gallagher and Zahavi 2008; Gallagher 2008; Zahavi 2008; Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009). Within the last couple of years, a number of ST and TT proponents, including Currie (2008), Herschbach (2008), Spaulding (2010), and de Vignemont and Jacob (2010/under review) have started to react and respond to what one for the sake of simplicity might call the phenomenological proposal (PP). In the following, I will address some of these critical responses, and in particular consider some recent objections made by Pierre Jacob. These epitomize the kinds of concerns that are being raised about PP at the moment, and thus facilitate a reply on behalf of PP that also applies more generally.

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Jacob points to two basic critical strands in what he terms the “direct-perception model of empathy,” i.e., a version of PP that has been defended by Shaun Gallagher and myself. One targets the simulation-based approach to empathy, the other targets assumptions common to both simulation-based and theory-theory based approaches to mindreading.

As for the first issue, simulation-based approaches to empathy have typically emphasized that empathy requires what Jacob calls the “interpersonal similarity relation condition”, and what others have termed the “isomorphism condition”, i.e., that an empathizer’s experience must stand in a suitable similarity relation to the target’s experience in order for the former to qualify as a case of empathy. Jacob’s critical point is that it is unclear whether the direct-perception model can itself offer an account that is entirely free from the interpersonal similarity relation.

As for the second issue, Jacob states that the direct-perception model is offered as an account free from the widely shared joint assumption that most, if not all, of another’s psychological states and experiences are unobservable, and that one’s understanding of another’s psychological states and experiences are consequently based on inferential processes. Jacob wants to counter this by arguing that it remains unclear how the direct-perception model can reject both assumptions without embracing behaviorism.

Jacob quite correctly observes that Gallagher’s and Zahavi’s respective accounts, although sharing a number of features, do not coincide completely.<sup>1</sup> In the following, I will mainly concern myself with the two issues just mentioned, since they both engage directly with my own view. My ambition will be relatively modest. My main aim will be to advance the debate by making it clearer where there is in fact substantial disagreement and where the disagreement in question is of a more terminological nature or connected to the fact that rather different research agendas are being pursued or, in some cases, based on simple misunderstandings.

## 1 Empathy and Isomorphism

The notion of empathy does not have a long history. The German term “Einfühlung” had been used in the domain of aesthetics by the philosopher Robert Vischer, but was then taken over by Theodor Lipps, who introduced it into the field of social cognition and used the concept to designate our basic capacity to recognize others as minded creatures. It was Lipps’ notion that Edward Titchener, the American psychologist, had in mind when he in 1909 translated “Einfühlung” as “empathy”.

In an article from 1907 entitled *Das Wissen von fremden Ichen* Lipps argued that when I see a foreign gesture or expression, I have a tendency to reproduce it, and that this tendency also evokes the feeling normally associated with the expression. It is this feeling which is then projected into or onto the other’s perceived gesture, thereby allowing for some form of interpersonal understanding (Lipps 1907, 717–719). Although Lipps’ account was early on subjected to criticism by a number of philosophers from the phenomenological tradition, who all objected to the idea that

<sup>1</sup> Our respective accounts of empathy, for example, are quite different (cf. Gallagher 2011).

imitation constitutes the basis of empathy (cf. Zahavi 2010), his theory has remained influential and has a number of modern heirs. It is within the simulationist camp in particular that the notion of empathy has resurfaced as a central category. Gallese, for instance, has in various publications described empathy as a form of inner imitation (2003, 519) and has argued that it is what allows us to understand not only the actions, but also the displayed emotions and sensations of others (2001, 45). In fact, Gallese has even insisted that empathy “is relevant when accounting for all aspects of behavior enabling us to establish a meaningful link between others and ourselves” (2001, 43). Similarly, Hatfield et al. have recently defended the view that the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize one’s facial expressions, vocalizations, postures and movements with those of another person is basic to human interaction, and that this is what allows one to feel oneself into the emotional life of the other (Hatfield et al. 2009).

But let us consider the model espoused by Jacob (and colleagues).<sup>2</sup> Not unlike Lipps’ early phenomenological critics, Jacob emphasizes the need for an account that allows us to distinguish empathy, on the one hand, and emotional contagion, sympathy and standard mindreading on the other (Jacob 2011: § 2). Jacob proceeds to list five conditions that on his view will allow for such a differentiation (Jacob 2011: § 2):

- (i) *Affectivity condition*: both target and empathizer must experience some affective state or other.
- (ii) *Interpersonal similarity relation condition*: the target’s experience  $s$  and the empathizer’s experience  $s^*$  must stand in some similarity relation (e.g., both must experience some kind of pain or fear).
- (iii) *Causal path condition*: the empathizer’s being in affective state  $s^*$  is caused by the target’s being in affective state  $s$ .
- (iv) *Ascription condition*: there could not be empathetic understanding unless the empathizer ascribed the appropriate affective state to the target.
- (v) *Caring condition*: the empathizer must care about the target’s affective life.

Loosely put, the main point of the first condition is to set empathy apart from more theoretical, detached or “colder” ways of working out what another person is feeling. The second condition is supposed to distinguish empathy from sympathy, while the function of the third condition is to allow for a distinction between empathy and cases where two unrelated individuals by coincidence happens to fulfill condition one and two. Satisfaction of the fourth condition distinguishes empathy from a vicarious experience generated by a contagious process. The fifth condition might be slightly puzzling—after all, to define empathy in terms of care seems to blur the distinction between empathy and sympathy. But Jacob argues that the addition of the caring condition is necessary in order to capture the fact that empathy is not the default response to one’s awareness of another’s experience, but that it on the contrary is subject to top down modulation by contextual factors (Jacob 2011: § 2).

Does this proposal work? Let me first voice a few worries and then consider Jacob’s own objection to the direct-perception account of empathy.

<sup>2</sup> Slightly different versions of the account can for instance be found in de Vignemont and Singer 2006, and de Vignemont and Jacob 2010/under review.

Suppose someone sees that his friend is afraid and feels sad for him. On Jacob's scheme, this is a case of sympathy, not empathy, and indeed this seems the most natural way to describe it. However, it is questionable whether the reason why it should be classified in this way is that the two people are in different affective states. For what if someone sees that her friend is sad and feels sad for him? Now the "interpersonal similarity relation condition" is met, and it is likely that the other conditions are met as well, and so according to Jacob, it cannot any longer be a case of sympathy, but must instead be a case of empathy. But that does seem a bit odd. Allegedly the two cases are similar in that someone is feeling sadness and concern directed at another person's plight. And is it really plausible to suggest that what would otherwise have been a clear case of sympathetic concern becomes a case of empathizing instead, merely because we change the *target subject's* emotion?

A further troublesome implication of the interpersonal similarity requirement is the following. A quite common phenomenon is that one person expresses a certain emotion—say, anger—and another person sees this and reacts with a different type of emotion—say, fear. But this sort of case has no straightforward place in Jacob's classificatory scheme. In not meeting the interpersonal similarity requirement, this case can neither count as a case of empathy nor as a case of emotional contagion. Nor can it count as sympathy—the frightened person will typically not feel concern for the person expressing anger. So the only available option is to classify it as a case of "cold mindreading" or "cognitive perspective-taking" on a par with, say, me inferring from the fact that somebody is asking for aspirins that the person is in pain. But is that really satisfactory?

For Jacob empathy is a less direct and more mediated form of interpersonal understanding than the kind provided by standard mindreading. Whereas empathy must meet five requirements, standard mindreading must only meet one requirement—that of attributing a mental state to another (cf. de Vignemont and Jacob 2010/under review, 22). Obviously, one consequence of such a view is that empathy has a far more modest role to play in social understanding than many philosophers and psychologists have believed. Indeed, given Jacob's definition, it is doubtful whether empathy can play any *foundational* role in our understanding of others at all (cf. Zahavi and Overgaard 2012). Now, over the years, empathy has of course been defined in various ways, and if Jacob wants to reserve the term for a quite narrow class of phenomena—primarily exemplified by the case of empathetic pain—, he can of course choose to do so, though such a use will differ rather markedly from the way the term is used by most other people, including early empathy theorists such as Lipps, Stein and Husserl, who took it to designate the most basic capacity to recognize others as minded creatures (cf. Stein 1989, 6, Husserl 1962, 321). What is more worrisome is that Jacob's classificatory scheme apparently forces him to blur the distinction between basic cases of emotion recognition and more sophisticated cases of belief ascription, and to categorize both as instances of standard mindreading.

What about Jacob's objection to the direct-perception model of empathy? In his article, Jacob considers the following example (found in Scheler 1954 and discussed in Zahavi 2008): Imagine a situation where you empathize with my grief which is caused by the loss of my child. My grief is directed at the loss of my child, whereas your empathic response is directed at my grief. In such a case, the intentional objects of the two experiences differ, and it is entirely appropriate to claim that we are

dealing with two distinct types of experience. Now, Jacob views this example as a potential threat to his own definition with its emphasis on interpersonal similarity, but he argues that the fact that the empathic experience differs from the experience of grief might still be compatible with and satisfy the interpersonal similarity requirement. How is that supposed to work? Well, if the intentional object of your empathy is my grief, and if the intentional object of my grief is the loss of the child, then the latter, i.e. the content of the grief, might still figure as part of the content of your empathy. But if this is so, mereological considerations can warrant the claim that there is after all significant similarity between the two experiences, thereby saving his own proposal. To put it differently, not only can Jacob's definition of empathy withstand the alleged counter-example, but if his analysis is correct, the direct-perception account of empathy will also require some amount of interpersonal similarity despite its claims to the contrary (Jacob 2011: § 2).

One initial response is that one could easily change the example to block this kind of move. I might after all empathize with your grief (in the sense of immediately recognizing it) even if I don't know the reason for or object of it. But a more fundamental worry with this line of argument concerns the question of what precisely similarity is supposed to cover. In Goldman's work on simulation, we find the view that a process  $P$  can be called a simulation of another process  $P^*$ , as long as  $P$  duplicates, replicates or resembles  $P^*$  in some significant respects (Goldman 2006, 36). Given that everything resembles everything else in some respect, it is obviously important to specify what is meant by significant. I have a somewhat similar worry with Jacob's argument. After all, in order for the "interpersonal similarity relation condition" to be satisfied it cannot be sufficient that, say, the target has a mind, and the empathizer has a mind as well. If the condition is to have any real content, it has to be far more specific. But I would suggest that Jacob's reliance on mereological considerations is far too deflationary and ultimately constitutes a problem for his own account. Why? If all that is required is that the content of the target's experience is part of the content of the empathizer's experience, i.e., if this is sufficient, it will make most, if not all, cases of sympathy satisfy the interpersonal similarity requirement as well, and consequently put considerable pressure on Jacob's attempt to differentiate empathy and sympathy by means of the earlier mentioned list of conditions.<sup>3</sup>

## 2 Theory of Mind and Social Perception

For a time Theory-Theory (TT) and Simulation-Theory (ST) were supposed to be "the only two games in town" (Stich and Nichols 1995; Goldman 1995). Lately, however, a number of people have started arguing that TT and ST share a number of crucial but questionable assumptions that ultimately impede a correct understanding of central forms of social interaction, including basic face-to-face engagement.

<sup>3</sup> It is a slight irony that the example considered by Jacob was actually described by me as a case that more obviously exemplified sympathy than empathy (Zahavi 2008, 516). So in his attempt to show that the example involves a form of interpersonal similarity, Jacob is doing his best to undermine his own classification.

Several critics have argued that TT and ST focus too narrowly on our ability to explain and predict the actions of others, as if our social life is predominantly a question of ascribing causally efficacious inner mental states (mainly beliefs and desires) to others in order to facilitate our prediction, explanation, and controlling of their behavior. Moreover, TT and ST have been accused of presupposing the fundamental opacity or invisibility of other minds. Prominent proponents of TT and ST have, for instance, argued that it is because of the lack of any direct access to the mental states of others—which are frequently described as “inherently unobservable constructs” (Mitchell 2008)—that we need to rely on and employ either theoretical inferences or internal simulations. Indeed as Epley and Waytz repeatedly claim in their new survey chapter on “Mind Perception” in *The Handbook of Social Psychology: Others’ mental states are unobservable and inherently invisible and it is precisely because people lack direct information about others’ mental states that they must base their inferences on whatever information about others that they do, in fact, have access to. They must make a leap from the observable behavior to the unobservable mental states, a leap employing either simulation or theoretical inference* (Epley and Waytz 2009, 499, 505, 518).

By contrast, a guiding idea in the emerging alternative is a denial of the claim that our engagement with others as minded creatures is exclusively a question of attributing hidden mental states to them. Rather, the claim has been that we need to take the embodied and environmentally embedded nature of psychological life seriously and acknowledge a more immediate experiential access to the minds of others which is prior to and more fundamental than any imaginative projection or theoretical inference. Whereas some have talked of this access in terms of an *empathic understanding*, others have referred to it in terms of a form of *direct social perception*.

When taking a bird’s eye perspective on the debate, however, it is difficult to avoid the impression that the parties involved are to some extent talking at cross purposes. Part of the disagreement is clearly based on the fact that people are using and understanding the involved terms differently. Moreover, as will become clear in the following it is far from clear that the different theories are all addressing the same explanandum.

In various writings, Gallese has proposed that empathy provides a “direct experiential understanding” of others (Gallese et al. 2004, 396). This claim has been criticized by de Vignemont and Singer who have argued that empathy must on the contrary be indirect since it is influenced by contextual factors and can be modulated, for instance, by appraisal processes (de Vignemont and Singer 2006, 437).

Jacob’s objection to Gallagher and Zahavi is of a somewhat similar kind. He first takes issue with the claim that social perception is just as direct as the perceptual experience of inanimate objects, by questioning whether the latter is really direct. As he points out in discussing an example by Gallagher, if I am to see and recognize something as “my car,” I need knowledge of the right contextual cues, including previous knowledge of perceived objects and knowledge of various background conditions, and if so, it is not at all clear to what extent the perceptual experience in question can count as direct (Jacob 2011: § 4). Jacob next considers the question of whether it makes sense to speak of social perception. His answer is quite

straightforward. Although it is uncontroversial that one's understanding of another's intentions or emotions is informed and influenced by the other's goal-directed and expressive behavior, we have to distinguish sharply between the expressive behavior and the psychological states. The former does not constitute the latter (Jacob 2011: § 5). To put it differently, one can only be said to perceive the other's intentions or emotions, if the other's bodily behavior constitute those very intentions and emotions. If they do not constitute them, then clearly by perceiving the former one cannot perceive the latter. But if they do constitute them, then the proposal basically amounts to a form of (unacceptable) behaviorism (Jacob 2011: § 5).

Jacob then presses home his critical point by arguing that we cannot even be said to be directly acquainted with another's emotion on the ground that we can perceive it *in* the other's expressive behavior, since we frequently, for instance in the case of expressions of disgust, need to consider contextual cues as well in order to be able to discriminate the emotion in question from other emotions such as pain (Jacob 2011: § 5). And if we have to rely on contextual cues, then again—in line with the argument presented above—we must be said to lack any kind of direct acquaintance.

There is a lot that can be said in response to this criticism. Let me divide my reply into three different sections.

## 2.1 The Role of Context

The first issue concerns the issue of context. Is it impossible for something to be given directly and contextually at the same time? Arguably it all depends on what we mean by “direct.” Consider first the case of vision. Vision usually counts as the paradigm of direct experience. I can read about Angel Falls in the Canaima National Park in Venezuela, I can inspect a photograph of it, and I can see and experience it in its splendor. On most accounts, the latter acquaintance is of a more direct kind than the two former. But—and this is an old insight found for instance in the work of many gestalt psychologists—whenever we perceive an object, we perceive it in a perceptual field. We are conscious of it in a particular setting, and the way it is given to us is influenced by contextual cues, by what is co-given with it. But does that contradict the claim that the perceptual object is directly given? Consider another case. You are sitting enjoying a glass of 1982 Chateau Margaux. Due to your acquired and honed skills as a wine connoisseur you are able to detect and discern flavors and aromas imperceptible to a novice. Does that make your access to the wine in question indirect? Consider finally the case of a utensil, say, a trocar.<sup>4</sup> To see something as a trocar, a lot of background knowledge is required. But does that mean that your access to it is indirect and non-experiential? Does it entail that you cannot literally be said to perceive a trocar?

When making the claim that there is a fundamental form of social cognition which is direct, few, if any, phenomenologists would deny that the social understanding in question is influenced and enriched by background knowledge,

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<sup>4</sup> For the uninitiated, a trocar is a surgical instrument with a sharply pointed and often three-sided end which is used within a cannula, and designed to be inserted into a vein, artery, bone marrow or body cavity.

contextual cues and past experiences.<sup>5</sup> Critics might argue that this just proves that social cognition is indirect, and that any insistence on its direct character simply involves a misuse of the term “direct”. In reply, let me first point out that if this were correct it would entail that the dispute is largely terminological. And it should be obvious that PP cannot be rejected by making the case that our ordinary understanding of others is contextual, since this is not being disputed. Secondly, however, I think one should acknowledge that there simply isn’t any established view on what “direct” means. Rather than seeing “direct” and “contextual” as the relevant contrast, I find it quite legitimate (and more natural) to focus instead on the difference between “direct” and “indirect” or “mediated”, and to insist that in some (not all, but some) cases my understanding of the other’s psychological state can be said to be direct in the sense that that state is my primary intentional object. There is, so to speak, nothing that gets in the way, and it is not as if I am first directed at an intermediary, something different from the state, and then only in a secondary step target it. Moreover, and importantly, the state is experienced as actually present to me, thereby making the experience in question very different from, say, reasoning that the other is upset, because the letter she received has been torn up, or inferring that the other is drunk because he is surrounded by a dozen empty beer bottles, or concluding that the other must be furious because I would be furious if I had been subjected to the same treatment as he has. I take all of the latter cases to be more indirect forms of social cognition, and to insist that my recognition of, say, the other’s joy or fear in her facial expression is also indirect simply blurs important distinctions.

One objection to the claim that we can enjoy a direct experiential understanding of others’ mental states is that such a claim is simply absurd, since it overlooks the fact that we do not have the same kind of access to the minds of others that we have to our own. To phrase it differently, any convincing account of our understanding of others must respect the asymmetry between self-ascription and other-ascription of mental states. It must respect the fact that, whereas I enjoy a first-person perspective on my own mental life, I do not have first-personal access to the minds of others. This is precisely the objection we find in de Vignemont, since she equates Gallese’s notion of direct experiential understanding with that of having an access to other people’s states “as if they were one’s own” (de Vignemont 2010, 284)? The problem, though, is that this objection construes direct access to another’s mental state on the model of direct access to one’s own mental state, as if the latter constitutes the gold standard of what directness amounts to. But it only makes sense to speak of indirect knowledge where this can be contrasted with a more direct form of knowledge, and arguably there is no more direct way of knowing that *another* is in pain than seeing him writhe in pain. By contrast, noticing a bottle of pain-killers next to his bedside together with an empty glass of water and concluding that he has been in pain is an example of knowing indirectly or by way of inference (Bennett and Hacker 2003, 89, 93). To put it differently, to experience (rather than merely imagine, simulate or

<sup>5</sup> Just to avoid misunderstandings, when claiming that social perception is as direct as the perceptual experience of inanimate objects, the claim is not that interpersonal understanding ought to be modeled on our understanding of inanimate objects. The point is not that social perception is simply a subclass of object-perception. The claim is rather that it is a distinct form of intentionality that is as direct as object-perception.

theorize about) another's psychological states is to experience the intentional and expressive behavior of the other. The fact that I can be mistaken and deceived is no argument against the experiential character of the access. Moreover, the fact that my experiential access to the minds of others differs from my experiential access to my own mind is not an imperfection or shortcoming. On the contrary, it is a difference that is constitutional. It is precisely because of this difference, precisely because of this asymmetry, that we can claim that the minds we experience are *other* minds. As Husserl points out, had I had the same access to the consciousness of the other as I have to my own, the other would cease being an other and would instead become a part of myself (Husserl 1999, 109).

Some might consider this a mere terminological fix to a serious philosophical challenge. By simply stipulating that we ought to operate with a deflated notion of experiential access in the domain of social cognition, one that entitles one to say that one is directly acquainted with another's psychological state simply by perceiving it in the other's intentional and expressive behavior, phenomenologists mistakenly think they can avoid the threat of solipsism and circumvent the problem of other minds. I don't think this objection is justified, but my main concern for now is merely to emphasize that the phenomenological claim concerning a direct experiential access to another's psychological state is not in any tension with the important point that we do not have access to other people's states "as if they were our own". We must, of course, respect the difference between self-ascription and other-ascription, between a first-person perspective and a second- or third-person perspective, but we should also conceive of it in a manner that avoids giving rise to the mistaken view that only my own experiences are given to me and that the behavior of the other shields his experiences from me and makes their very existence hypothetical (Avramides 2001, 187).

## 2.2 Behaviorism

Let me next move on to the closely related issue about behaviorism. *Prima facie* there is of course something rather odd about accusing phenomenologists of being behaviorists. After all, one of the characteristic features of a phenomenological approach to consciousness has been its recurrent emphasis on the importance of subjectivity and the first-person experiential character of consciousness. As a matter of fact, I can't think of anybody from that philosophical tradition who would deny that there is more to consciousness than what is observable in bodily expressions. It is certainly not a view that I have defended in my own writings on social cognition and intersubjectivity (cf. Zahavi 1996, 2001, 2002, 2007, 2008, 2010). I would consequently rephrase the central question. Contrary to what Jacob is claiming, I don't think the question is whether bodily expressivity exhausts our mental life. Rather the point of controversy concerns whether bodily expressivity has intrinsic psychological meaning, or whether whatever psychological meaning it has is derived. Jacob seems to think that bodily expressivity owes whatever psychological meaning it has exclusively to the fact that it stands in a certain relationship to various hidden mental states. This is what is being disputed by proponents of PP. But this doesn't amount to behaviorism. First of all, the idea is not to identify or reduce mental states to behavior or dispositions to behavior. There is more to the mind than

its behavioral manifestation—and this doesn't only hold true for complex abstract beliefs, but also for simple volitions and basic emotions. Secondly, we shouldn't make the mistake of reducing the intentional and expressive behavior in question to mere physical movement (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1963; Waldenfels 1980). Rather the point is to recognize that expressive phenomena are already from the start soaked with mindedness. Our understanding of both emotionality and agency is deeply informed and influenced by their behavioral manifestations, and if asked to define say pride, anger or jealousy, it would be quite unnatural to focus exclusively on the intentionality and phenomenality of the emotions, and to exclude all reference to their expressive and behavioral manifestations. It could, of course, be objected that a definition ought to focus on the necessary and sufficient conditions and that playacting and stoic suppression have shown behavior to be neither necessary nor sufficient. But first of all, surely such cases are the exceptions rather than the norm. It is quite hard to see why we should conclude from such exceptional cases alone that expressive and intentional behavior lack intrinsic psychological significance. Secondly, isn't the underlying assumption, that unexpressed experiences are just like expressed experiences, challenged by empirical evidence (cf. Niedenthal 2007; Laird 2007)?<sup>6</sup> Finally, were we to deny that some expressions were psychologically meaningful from the very start, were we to opt for what McCulloch has called a behavior-rejecting mentalism (McCulloch 2003, 94), we would be confronted with different versions of the problem of other minds. One version would be of the more epistemological kind. If the behavior per se were psychologically meaningless, if it could be adequately accounted for in terms of a purely physical analysis—like the falling of snowflakes or the shifting of a mobile in the wind—what should motivate us to seek for a psychological explanation of it? And wouldn't we be caught in circularity if we inferred the underlying mental states on the basis of the observed behavior, on the one hand, and appealed to the underlying mental states in order to gather the meaning of the behavior, on the other hand (Malle 2005, 27)? Another version would be the so-called conceptual problem of other minds. If my self-experience were, in the primary instance, of a purely mental nature, i.e., if my bodily behavior did not figure essentially in my self-ascription of (some) psychological states, while my ascription of mental states to others were based solely on their bodily behavior, what, then, should guarantee that we are, in fact, ascribing the same type of states to self and to others? How would we ever come to be in possession of a truly general concept of mind that is equally applicable to different subjects (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2002, 434; Davidson 2001, 207; Avramides 2001, 135, 224)?

Anyway, my main concern for now is just to question Jacob's claim that one is committed to behaviorism if one claims that one can perceive *some* aspects of the mental life of others. And again, let me emphasize that this is what the proposal

<sup>6</sup> In addition, one might also opt for a disjunctive account of behavior. As Overgaard puts it, "On this account, the difference between the person who genuinely vents her anger and the person feigning anger is not that in the former case, there is the angry behaviour plus a feeling of anger, while in the latter case, there is only the behaviour (or rather, that plus an intention to deceive, say). Rather, even if the two behaviours are movement-for-movement indistinguishable to an outside spectator, they are *different kinds* of processes. In the one case, the visible behaviour is a person's coming to grips with the world as infuriating; in the other it is not" (Overgaard 2012).

amounts to, i.e., what is being suggested is not that *every* aspect of the mental life of others is perceptually accessible.<sup>7</sup>

It is in this context revealing that Jacob in presenting his case writes that an agent's intentional behavior or expressive behavior can be said to "betray" the intention or emotion that caused the agent's movements (Jacob 2011: § 5). To use the term "betray" (rather than "manifest", "disclose", or "express") in this context evokes the impression that we ought to take, say, poker play, where a player's twitching eye might be said to betray his nervousness, as the paradigmatic case of social understanding. Would we also say that the scream of the non-anaesthetized patient on the surgeon's table betrays his pain, although it must be sharply distinguished from it, or that the mother's embrace betrays her affection, though it must be sharply distinguished from the latter? Does it really make sense to divide phenomena such as a handshake, a kiss or a smile neatly into their psychological and behavioral aspects? I think much of the empirical work in the theory of mind debate is still conducted within a framework dictated by this forced choice. I would suggest that it is a false choice and that real progress in the field of social cognition is conditional upon the exploration of a third alternative, one that takes us beyond the dichotomy of behavior-reading and mind-reading (cf. Sinigaglia 2008).

### 2.3 Agreeing on the Explanandum

One of the frequent objections directed at PP is that its emphasis on direct social perception is totally incapable of doing justice to and accounting for the highly sophisticated forms of social understanding that we employ in our daily interaction with others. To put it differently, proponents of ST and TT frequently object to PP by pointing to cases that are undeniably examples of social cognition, but, allegedly, outside the scope of the phenomenological account. In my view, however, this objection misses the point. The objection would only be valid if the defenders of PP were claiming to provide an exhaustive explanation of all the phenomena of social cognition, and I don't think that is a majority view. To put it differently, the claim made by most phenomenologists is not that all forms of social cognition can be accounted for by means of such notions as empathic understanding or direct social perception. Rather, the view defended by most (and I am simplifying now, since there are obviously also internal differences) is a composite of different claims.

First of all, many would claim that when it comes to understanding the reasons and motives of another, we shouldn't overlook the fact that our encounter with another is never an encounter with an entity existing outside a specific situation, but with an agent in the middle of a pragmatic context that throws light on the intentions of that agent. If, on a football field, I see you run towards a football, my understanding of your intentions is obviously facilitated by the fact that I can also see the football and the football field, and the actions that they afford. To put it

<sup>7</sup> That is also why I would object to a recent claim by Newen and Schlicht, namely that the central assertion of the Interaction-Theory defended by Gallagher and Zahavi is that in most cases—and this would include even complex mental states—we directly perceive what other people are up to (2010, 236). This is not my view. I am not denying that others can at times be very hard to figure out; I am denying that the very recognition of others as minded beings is a very challenging task, one that involves a leap from observable behavior to unobservable mental states.

differently, when seeking to understand the why of the other's actions, it is always productive to focus on the shared motivational context, since the cues it provides can offload part of the cognitive burden of having to make explicit inferences about the hidden mental states of the other.

Secondly, although many would argue that we have to go beyond what is directly available in order to attain deeper levels of interpersonal understanding (Schutz 1967, 168), most would also insist that any convincing account of social cognition must highlight the basic and fundamental character of the face-to-face encounter. To put it differently, an account of social cognition shouldn't just address the question of detached belief-ascription. It should consider the whole range of mental states, including sensations and emotions. And if ST and TT want to counter PP they should not do so by focusing on highly sophisticated forms of social cognition that involve metarepresentation, cognitive perspective shifting, or imaginative projection. No, they should focus on the most basic face-to-face encounters, and show how even something like sensitivity to emotional expressions or detection of agency involve and rely on theoretical inferences or internal simulations.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, and I think this is something that has been somewhat overlooked in the recent criticism of PP, whereas TT and ST have primarily been concerned with the question of how we go about predicting and explaining the behavior of others, and hence with the question of how we go about ascribing specific mental states to others, I think many phenomenologists have also been pursuing a somewhat different question. In daily life, people worry about whether others like them or not, find them trustworthy or not, or attractive or not. People wonder whether others are being truthful or deceptive, whether others are motivated by greed or generosity, and whether others behaved intentionally or accidentally. They very rarely wonder whether others are minded in the first place. In fact that is something that is not only taken for granted; it is also something the certitude of which is of a quite different magnitude than whatever certainty we might have regarding the ascription of specific mental states to others. As Gurwitsch writes at one point, in ordinary life, we are never faced with the choice about whether or not we wish to take the people we are meeting in the street or conversing with as real people or mere automatons. And as he then asks, where does this deep-rooted certainty, which far exceeds our confidence in well-confirmed scientific hypotheses, come from (Gurwitsch 1979, 10–11)? To put it differently, I want to suggest that part of what the phenomenologists have been interested in is this fundamental ascription of mindedness to others. I consequently think we should distinguish two different problems. One problem concerns how we come to understand that another agent has a mind in the first place; another problem concerns how we determine that agent's more specific state of mind. Whereas ST and TT have mainly focused on the latter question,

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<sup>8</sup> It would at this point have been natural to consider and discuss Gallese's notion of embodied simulation. This is so, not only because it seeks to offer a very basic and low-level account of action and emotion understanding that relies on mirror-resonance mechanisms, and because it has recently been subjected to an influential criticism by Jacob (2008), but also because Gallese explicitly and repeatedly claims that his own account is in line with, and a further development of, the account of interpersonal understanding found in Stein, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty (Gallese 2001, 2003, 2005). If this were correct, it would obviously challenge the suggestion that PP constitutes a real alternative to ST. However, since I am addressing this question in a separate publication, I will not pursue it further here (cf. Zahavi 2011).

phenomenologists have also been interested in the former question. The reason for this obviously has to do with a concern for the philosophical problem of other minds. The ambition has on the one hand been to show that traditional attempts at solving the problem, including various forms of analogical inference, fail (cf. Gurwitsch 1979, 1–33), and on the other, to show why the very problem, and the skepticism it has often given rise to, might be premised on a flawed conception of mentality (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1964, 114). In addition, a standard claim has also been that the recognition of others as minded creatures is not only more fundamental, but also more certain than our ascription of specific beliefs and emotions to others. As Schutz pointed out, the experience of the presence of others is prior to any understanding of others that draws on imaginative projection, autobiographical memory or theoretical knowledge (Schutz 1967, 162). We only start to employ the latter strategies, when we are already convinced that we are facing minded creatures, but are simply unsure about precisely how we are to interpret the expressive phenomena in question, or to put it differently, we would not start to inquire into the meaning of another's actions, we would not attempt to predict or explain them, were we not already convinced that the other was a minded, experiencing subject. Moreover, even if we must consider the social, cultural, and historical context if we wish to understand *why* somebody is feeling the way he does or *why* he is acting the way he does, even if there is much about the other that isn't readily accessible, there is a decisive difference between our everyday uncertainty about what precisely others might be thinking about, and the nightmare vision of the solipsist. Although we might be uncertain about the specific beliefs and intentions of others, this uncertainty does *not* make us question their very mindedness.

If one wants to object to and criticize PP, one has to bear this in mind. One rather obvious question to then also consider is whether our ascription of basic mindedness to others is as dependent on contextual cues and background knowledge as our ascription of specific mental states. The answer is clearly no.

I realize, of course, that more arguments must be put on the table if one is to argue convincingly for the claims put forth in these three subsections, but I hope to have made it clearer what precisely PP amounts to.

### 3 The Role of Phenomenology

At one point Pierre Jacob considers and criticizes what has been called the simple phenomenological argument against simulation theory, which is basically as follows. If simulation is (1) explicit (i.e., a conscious or even introspective process), and (2) the default way in which we understand others, and therefore pervasive in our everyday social cognition, then one ought to have some awareness of the different steps that one goes through as one consciously simulates the other's mental states. Certainly, when trying to understand why somebody is acting or reacting in a certain way, we might indeed consciously try to put ourselves in the target's mental shoes, but to claim that this is the default method of "mentalization," i.e., to claim that we standardly engage in explicit conscious simulation whenever we understand others as minded creatures, isn't supported by phenomenological and experiential evidence. Now, in response Jacob remarks that he finds the argument unconvincing since, on

his view, it involves a misleading use of the implicit/explicit distinction. According to Jacob, the distinction between implicit and explicit simulation applies to cognitive tasks which can be carried out either explicitly via the use of language or implicitly without using language. And in both cases, mental simulation is the name of a cognitive heuristics whose states, operations, and computations are meant to be beyond the scope of conscious awareness. As a result, any appeal to phenomenological evidence reflects a too naïve trust in the ability to introspectively unearth and disclose non-conscious processes (Jacob 2011: § 3).

The problem with this objection, however, is that Jacob defines implicit and explicit differently than Gallagher and I. On our understanding explicit simulation refers to a conscious, voluntary, effortful and deliberative type of simulation; and it is hard to see why phenomenological evidence should be irrelevant when assessing the frequency of this type of simulation. Jacob might object that if this is how we define the term, we are *de facto* fighting a straw man, since no one defends such a view of simulation. But that is hardly true. Goldman's appeal to available introspective evidence as a *prima facie* argument in support of simulation theory (Goldman 1995, 82) would not make sense unless he was referring to a process that was consciously available and accessible. Moreover, consider the following quote, from two of Jacob's colleagues and collaborators, whose use of the terms "implicit" and "explicit" coincides with the way Gallagher and I have been using them:

Simulation can be conceived as the explicit, conscious imaginary enactment of the mental states and processes of others. It can be considered as a subpersonal process unfolding automatically and without conscious control. Or it can be thought of as a hybrid of implicit and explicit simulation. [...] We [...] believe that simulation is the root form of interpersonal mentalization and that it is best conceived as a hybrid of explicit and implicit processes, with subpersonal neural simulation serving as a basis for explicit mental simulation (Jeannerod and Pacherie 2004, 128–129).

Must someone who defends the view that we enjoy direct access to (some of) another's mental states deny that this access is enabled by various sub-personal mechanisms or non-conscious psychological processes? No, because the claim concerning direct access is primarily a phenomenological claim.<sup>9</sup> It would, however, be a mistake to think that that settles the issue and allows for an easy division of labor: Whereas phenomenologists concern themselves with how things seem, cognitive scientists deal with the real underlying mechanisms, and as long as one is not so naïve as to believe in a straightforward isomorphism there is no reason to think that the former descriptions should be of any relevance to the latter explorations. This seems to be the view espoused by Spaulding, who writes: "The debate in mindreading between the Theory Theory and the Simulation Theory is a debate about the architecture and sub-personal processes responsible for social cognition. Neither account is committed to any view on what phenomenology tells us is going on in our ordinary interactions" (Spaulding 2010, 131). As we have just

<sup>9</sup> Whereas it makes good sense to characterize different types of sub-personal information processing as simpler or more complex, it is harder to see an obvious application of the concept of "direct" in that domain, since all the processes will involve various degrees of mediation.

seen, contrary to what Spaulding is claiming, some simulationists obviously do refer to conscious processes. But in addition, her view is quite puzzling. Presumably the mechanisms that theory-theory and simulation theory investigate are mechanisms supposed to explain something. What is the explanandum? Ultimately, the full diversity of personal level social cognition and interaction. If we don't know the explanandum well, if we don't possess careful descriptions of its different facets—which is arguably one of the things that phenomenology can offer—it will, to put it mildly, be kind of hard to assess the relevance and explanatory power of the sub-personal mechanisms. Consider, moreover, the standard argument for why we need to stipulate something like inner simulations or theoretical inferences in the first place. The explanation is typically that we need such processes in order to move from the input which is psychologically meaningless—such as the perception of physical qualities and their changes, say, a distortion of facial muscles—to the output—which is an ascription of mental states, say, joy or happiness, to the other. In short, the processes are needed in order to supplement the input with information coming from elsewhere in order to generate the required output. If phenomenological analysis tells us that the perceptually observed expressive phenomenon is already saturated with psychological meaning and that this is the explanandum, we should reconsider postulating mechanisms supposed to bridge a nonexistent gap. Some might counter with the claim that the input, the perception of the expressive behavior, is, like the perception of any ordinary physical objects, already underpinned by various sub-personal cognitive mechanisms employing rule-based manipulations of symbolic representations (to take just one traditional account on offer). But whether or not such a proposal has any merit, it is not and has not been the primary target of my criticism of the theory theory (cf. Zahavi and Gallagher 2008).

#### 4 Conclusion

In his criticism, Jacob basically suggests that an endorsement of PP is hugely controversial in that it apparently commits one to behaviorism. As I have pointed out above, PP does not claim that everything is open to view or that others are totally transparent. The claim is not that every aspect of the mental life of others is perceptually accessible, but merely that one can have a direct access to some aspects of the mental life of others. Moreover, I don't think such a claim is controversial. I think it is far more mainstream than Jacob realizes.<sup>10</sup> Not only have a number of philosophers, from a variety of different traditions, recently been entertaining similar ideas (cf. Rudd 2003; Overgaard 2005; Cassam 2007; Newen and Schlicht 2009; Smith 2010; Stout 2010, McNeill 2011), but consider also, to just pick one further example, Tomasello's proposal that social cognition takes three forms. We can understand others 1) as animate beings, 2) as intentional agents, and 3) as mental

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<sup>10</sup> It is also intriguing that Jacob in presenting his own case writes that there is nearly universal consensus “that most, if not all, of another's psychological states and experiences are unobservable” (Jacob 2011: § 1). Why this slight hesitation on his behalf? If he is prepared to accept that a few mental states might be observable, would he then also be prepared to accept that there might some cases where direct social perception is possible?

agents. In Tomasello's view, the ontogenetic relevance of this tripartition is straightforward. Whereas infants are able to distinguish animate beings from non-animate beings from birth onwards, they are only able to detect intentionality, in the sense of goal-directed behavior, from around 9–12 months of age (as evidenced in phenomena such as joint attention, gaze following, joint engagement, imitative learning, etc.), and they only become aware of others as mental agents with beliefs that might differ from their own at around 4–5 years of age. Why does the last step take so much longer, on Tomasello's view? Part of his answer concerns the different role of expressive behavior. Whereas the animacy of others is directly expressed in their behavior, intentionality is also expressed in actions, but is at the same time somewhat divorced from them, since on occasion it may remain unexpressed or be expressed in different ways. Finally when it comes to thoughts and beliefs these might lack natural behavioral expressions altogether (Tomasello 1999, 179), which is what makes them so much more difficult to grasp. Now, one might certainly question Tomasello's choice of terms (the distinction between intentional agents and mental agents is problematic in that it might suggest both that there is nothing mindful about goal-directed actions and no intentionality to thoughts and beliefs) as well as his proposed developmental time-frame (compare for instance Onishi and Baillargeon 2005), but his distinction between different levels of social understanding, including his focus on the infant's innate, automatic and pre-reflective ability to tune in to and respond to the expressive behavior of others (supposedly including early sensitivity to emotional expressions) seems quite compatible with PP.

As should be clear from what I said so far, I don't consider the kind of direct social perception defended by PP an alternative to the forms of mindreading proposed by ST or TT. Our social understanding comes in many shapes and forms, and we need multiple complementary accounts in order to cover the variety of abilities, skills and strategies that we draw on and employ in order to understand and make sense of others. If one accepts this view, there will, of course, be a question of deciding precisely where to draw the line. In what cases and how frequently do we draw on forms of mindreading based on imagination or inference, and when are more direct forms of social understanding sufficient? But more important than this adjudication is the question of whether the former strategies necessarily presuppose a more direct form of social understanding in order to get off the ground. And that, of course, would be the view that I am defending.

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