

ANNA MARIA PASSASEO
Editor

CURRENT ISSUES
IN MORAL MATTERS

A Call for Education



MESSINA
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

ANNA MARIA PASSASEO

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IN MORAL MATTERS**

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THE EMPATHIC EROSION: THE LOSS OF VALUES

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SUMMARY: 1. The basics of empathy: recognizing emotions. – 2. The zero degree of empathy: the annihilation of the other.

1. The basics of empathy: recognizing emotions

The concept of empathy is not a new matter, it is already present in Tolomeo's *Tetrabiblos* as a physical passion or an empathy of the flesh, but finds its original place thanks to the German word *Einfühlung*¹ which appears in Germany in the second half of the Eighteenth Century, in the romantic cultural climate, and began to assume a much more significant meaning thanks to Vischer, who included it in the concept of philosophical aesthetics². In 1909 Titchener translated the word *Einfühlung* in English as empathy and, still in the field of aesthetic enjoyment, the first attempt at a systematic generalization of empathy was due to Theodor Lipps, who underlined that the objects of aesthetic experience are not only observed, but emotionally shared. In particular, Bühler's works on the mimic correspondence between the child and the mother in the first months of life are worth mentioning.

The studies conducted by Stern on emotional understanding and by Trevarthen on intersubjectivity underline this construct. Emotional contagion, related by Hoffman to the concept of *global empathy* – which underlines the fusion that the child experiences due to a lack of differentiation between self and other – in Wallon's opinion, and subsequently also shared by Hoffman, it is not limited to

¹ A. PINOTTI, *Empatia. Storia di un'idea da Platone al postumano* Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2011, pp. 33-34.

² K.R. STUEBER, *L'empatia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2010 [2006], p. 31.

early childhood, but it can also recur in adulthood. The processes involved, namely motor imitation and the primary circular reaction, do not involve any cognitive mediation and are automatic³. If emotional contagion, seen both as the child's emotional reflection of the maternal emotional states and as a contagion in adulthood, is related to innate imitative tendencies, therefore devoid of cognitive mediation, since there is no direct access to the emotion of the other, the forms of *parallel empathy* or *event-based empathy*, which begin at the end of the first year of life, of which Strayer is one of the most important academics, "occur when the situation activates an emotional response in the child based on the event itself and not necessarily in compliance with that of the person observed"⁴. At the age of three/four years, when even words are capable of provoking situations able to raise empathic responses, and therefore there is also a mediation of language, we reach forms of *participatory empathy*, which is a more evolved form of empathy and refers to the child's ability to differentiate his own emotion from that of other ones, to recognise the experience of the others from his own one. We therefore arrive at a first form of decentralization about oneself and the distinction of the other as different from us⁵. Participatory empathy, also defined as *mature* or *sharing oriented*, implies a greater cognitive mediation and the ability to assume the perspective and the role of the other (*role taking*) is considered the second component of empathy. Feshback's perspective is that *role taking* implies a gradual overcoming of egocentrism, one's own point of view that is increasingly distinct and does not overlap with others' one. Strayer defines it as the *representation of the experience of the other*⁶. Participatory empathy, as mentioned before, is best characterized when, around the sixth year, the ability to *decentralize* begins to manifest itself, understood as "vicarious sharing of the emotional state of others and it is characterized by the

³ S. BONINO et alii, *Empatia. I processi di condivisione delle emozioni*, Firenze, Giunti, 1998, pp. 22-23.

⁴ A.M. MENECHINI, *Sentire e condividere. Componenti psicologiche e correlati biologici dell'empatia*, Firenze, Seid Editori, 2010, p. 112.

⁵ Ivi, p. 115.

⁶ S. BONINO et alii, *Op. cit.*, p. 37.

subjective ability to be clear that the shared emotion is the other's one"⁷.

Empathy, in short, is one of the most advanced forms of communication of the human being, and it is thanks to the Rizzolatti, Gallese and Sinigaglia's work, however, that we begin to glimpse the first real scientific requirements of empathy. These authors discover *mirror neurons*, they are neurons involved in the "imitation" process, or more precisely involved in the decoding of information relating to the interaction between subject and object. The peculiarity of these cells lies in the fact that they are activated during the execution of specific acts and not during the presentation of an object. This requires a specific "vocabulary", called "acts vocabulary" because, if an action performed is not present in this "vocabulary", the cortical areas will not be activated and, therefore, the mirror neurons will not be involved. The recognition of emotions occurs in the same way; however, the emotional language is a shady, mysterious, often impenetrable language, hidden by a series of behavioural attitudes structured on "masks" that are worn so as not to let the real emotion leak out, in addition to the own fragility and vulnerability. And it's profound. The emotional language, if ever a metaphor could be used, would be the "language" of the sea depths which, however explored, remain imbued with mystery. Known, directed, mitigated, as far as possible, emotions lead towards horizons of meaning as they emerge from the profound sharing between those who "cure", not only therapeutically but also educationally, and those who are treated. This is the key to the essential and existential dimension of human conduct. The emotional language itself is subject to different interpretations, there is no common agreement in defining what an emotion is, what a feeling is and what a state of mind is. For W. Pasini, a feeling is something that involves the same emotions, imagination and sensations, it has a longer duration than emotions and it also compared to the different frame of mind that human beings experience on a daily basis⁸, for A. Damasio feelings are directed inward and private, emotions are

⁷ A.M. MENEGHINI, *Op. cit.*, p. 115.

⁸ Cfr. W. PASINI, *La qualità dei sentimenti*, Milano, Oscar Mondadori, 1995.

external and public⁹, but it is with R. Plutchick that a large number of linguistic references attributable to emotions emerge and without exploring the analysis and research conducted by the psychologist, here it is sufficient to say that “language is a complex structure that has evolved over a period of thousands of years. In each language there are many different historical elements. The words of the English language, for example, derive from Latin, Greek, German and French roots [...]. Over the centuries, a multiplicity of meanings can be associated with a word¹⁰. Anxiety, for example, is almost always recognized as an emotional word but, etymologically, it refers to the meaning of *causing pain* or *suffocation* and three definitions are reported in Webster: the first expresses the sense of a “painful discomfort of the mind in front of an evil in progress or anticipated”, the second refers to a “pathological state of restlessness and agitation with an anguishing sense of oppression in the heart” and, finally, the third, which has its roots in psychoanalytic theory, describes it as “an expectation of damage or danger without adequate foundation”¹¹. In the last theory examined it lacks the subjectivity of experience, so it is already evident how complex it is to divide emotional language from non-emotional language also because “the meanings of words are not only given by explicit definitions, but also by lists of related words or synonyms”¹². Verbal “labelling” of emotions, therefore, occurs through other paths. Schachter and Singer assert that it is “based on information on the physical and social context in which we live, and on knowledge of the types of emotions that are produced in certain situations [that] we place the label fear, love, sadness, anger or joy over that particular state”¹³. The verbal labelling of emotions depends, therefore, largely on the situations that one experiences since childhood, on the parental methods, mostly adults, through which one relates emotionally with subjects in the developing

⁹ A. DAMASIO, *Emozioni e coscienza*, Milano, Adelphi, 2000 [1999], p.52.

¹⁰ R. PLUTCHICK, *Psicologia e biologia delle emozioni*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1995 [1994], p. 64.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ivi*, p. 65.

¹³ S. SCHACHTER, J.E. SINGER, *Cognitive, Social and Physiological Determinants of Emotional State*, in «Psychological Review», n. 69, 1962, pp. 379-399.

phase. A little girl who comes into the house with her dirty with mud shoes and soils a carpet will be able to hear her mother yelling at her and being told that that type of behaviour makes her very angry. The little girl will be able to introject the idea that the word *anger* is connected to the mother's high tone of voice and abrupt behaviour. In the case of a child who sees another child kick the wall and who listen to the other child's mother calmly ask him why he is angry, he will link *anger* to active behaviours. It can be seen, from the two examples given, that the word *anger* can be used by adults in a variety of different situations, and this causes greater difficulties for the child in learning the concept useful for describing an internal state. Different exposures to different scripts are necessary for the child to use the term angry in different ways. Verbal labelling, however, can be attributed above all to primary emotions, such as anger, joy, fear, sadness since they are much more common and easily recognisable, while learning and identifying some mixed, more subtle emotions, such as hope and optimism, seems more difficult because they present a greater degree of ambiguity¹⁴.

The verbal labelling that would be necessary for emotions is not a simple "archival" work, rather it refers to the idea that every «emotion is confronted with a horizon of meaning, with an alter ego, with a you, with an object that can be internal, or external, and every emotion has its own internal *time* [...]. When we talk about time, we are obviously not referring to clock time, but to subjective time, to the time of one's life»¹⁵. The time lived is the amount of time we spend, also, in relationships with others, in a *meeting*, in *listening* and in *being listened*, and yet, without seeking help from scientific literature, it is plausible to say that often, if not always, our very existential condition is poor in tenderness, understanding, human warmth and this happens due to emotional inability or different defence mechanisms. We prefer "not to listen", and therefore not even to interpret and "label" that emotion present in the other. How, therefore, can we recognize emotion

¹⁴ R. PLUTCHICK, *Op. cit.*, p. 66.

¹⁵ E. BORGNA, *Le emozioni ferite*. Milano, Universale economica Feltrinelli, 2021, p. 23.

in others and activate an empathetic path if we are not even able to “understand” and interpret an emotion? How to cross the borders, the frontiers, the walls that separate us from the suffering, but also from the joy, of others? If affliction and discomfort require *compassion*, following Nussbaum’s line of thought, it is equally true, the philosopher suggests, that without empathy «we are likely to remain insensitive and inert, without even knowing how to make sense of the situation we observe. Empathy is a very important tool for making sense of what is happening to the other person, and also for creating interest and a form of contact»¹⁶.

A possible solution could be provided by recognizing, at least, the primary emotions, which R. Plutchick identifies as anger-fear, expectation-surprise, sadness-joy, acceptance-disgust which are bipolar, that is, each corresponds to the other which is of the “opposite sign” and all subject to growth in intensity. Thus, anger could become rage and fear terror¹⁷. P. Ekman, however, identified the fundamental emotions as anger, fear, sadness, joy, surprise, disgust – but also, although scientific literature usually stops at these first six, amusement, embarrassment, guilt and shame – following a research he conducted in the highlands of Papua New Guinea in the Fore tribe but, above all, the universality of emotions «is present not only in the expression of emotions, but also in some events that arouse it [...]. For sadness or anguish, the common theme is a significant loss. Who or what constitutes a loss may perhaps vary from one individual to another and from one culture to another [...], universals are also present in some of the changes that occur in our bodies when we experience an emotion»¹⁸. It is not possible, in Antonio Damasio’s opinion, to repress corporeity from existence and avoid the emotions which, instead, bind man with man, man with the world¹⁹ and it is in this bond, in the relationship, that the Ego is in front of another, and where the initial disturbance comes from the presence of the “body” of the other which is

¹⁶ M. NUSSBAUM, *L’intelligenza delle emozioni*, Bologna, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2004 [2001], p. 398.

¹⁷ R. PLUTCHICK, *Op. cit.*, pp. 67-72.

¹⁸ DALAI LAMA, D. GOLEMAN, *Emozioni distruttive*, Milano, Mondadori, 2003 [2003], p. 163.

¹⁹ A. DAMASIO, *L’errore di Cartesio. Emozione, ragione e cervello umano*, Milano, Adelphi, 1995 [1994], pp. 17-27.

not just a physical object, but the body of the other is the intermediary of something else.

It is «the expression of a conscience, of an experience, of expectations, of anxieties, of hope, of desires, of future prospects and of past memories. It is a *singularity* which, however, needs to be recognized by another singularity. The body [...] of the other is in fact not a thing among things, but it is a living body»²⁰. Identification with the other is a

form of knowledge that goes beyond the barriers, the frozen walls of separation between us and others [...]. Empathy is [...], the ability to identify with another. More precisely, the ability to experience the emotions, feelings and desires of others, including fears and phobias. Empathy presupposes a substratum or emotional potential common to all people so that no one can say or feel completely alien to the feelings of the other²¹.

Empathic extension presupposes recognizing the vulnerability, the fragility of the other and in the other and, in Chan Kwok-Bun's words, «the authenticity of what I discovered about myself is strengthened because I found confirmation of a part of me in you, and you in me»²².

Human nature is marked by empathy or, better said, by the possibility of empathic development, Iacoboni, one of the greatest academic of mirror neurons, states that, if «you see me suffering, in emotional discomfort for failing in scoring a penalty, the mirror neurons of your brain simulate the same discomfort. You automatically feel empathy for me: you know how I feel because you literally feel what I'm feeling»²³ and however, how do you raise an empathetic child? Not by telling him how to be empathetic, but by being empathetic to him. If mirror neurons are the neurobiological

²⁰ L. BOELLA, *Sentire l'altro. Conoscere e praticare l'empatia*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2006, p. 33.

²¹ M. TREVI cit. in E. BORGNA (A cura di), *Op. cit.*, p. 27.

²² CHAN KWOK-BUN cit., in J. RIFKIN (A cura di), *La civiltà dell'empatia. La corsa verso la coscienza globale nel mondo in crisi*, Milano, Mondadori, 2010 [2009], p. 41.

²³ Ivi, p. 78.

basis for the activation of empathic behaviour, it is the context that subsequently shapes the subject, directing them towards social and proactive behaviours.

2. *The zero degree of empathy: the annihilation of the other*

In 1961, to try to understand the brutal Nazi crimes, S. Milgram conducted an experiment to understand the *obedience to authority*. For the psychologist, the type of obedience present during the Second World War was structured on a psychological mechanism that associated individual action with a political purpose and which persuaded subjects to the point of making them commit actions that went beyond ethics and moral conduct²⁴.

Mutatis mutandis, in 1971 another experiment was carried out by P. Zimbardo and collaborators, known as the “Stanford experiment” or “*the Lucifer effect*”. Following G. Le Bon, according to which through the mechanism of *deindividuation*, individuals in a cohesive group lose their personal identities, Zimbardo recruited university students through advertising who were told that the experiment was aimed at studying the psychological effects of prison life. The experiment, which was supposed to last two weeks, was interrupted on the sixth day because of what was happening in the simulation. Zimbardo’s final analysis is summed up in the idea that people conform to social roles²⁵. In both

²⁴ S. Milgram creates a fake current generator, with 30 possible voltages, in a range from 15 to 450 volts. The victim is just an “actor”, a collaborator of the psychologist, who obviously simulates the pain felt during the fake shocks. The shocks, always fictitious, are gradually increased in intensity up to extremely dangerous voltages. Where the subject refuses to give the shock, the experiment ends, because it is considered an act of disobedience. The objective is to understand the mechanisms of obedience and although disobedience would not have been punished, 26 out of 40 people acted against their own moral rules. Cfr. S. MILGRAM, *Obbedienza all’ autorità. Uno sguardo sperimentale*, Torino, Einaudi, 2003 [1974].

²⁵ Among the chosen students, some took on the role of guards, the others of prisoners, in a completely random way. The first were divided into groups of three people who worked eight-hour shifts, the prisoners stayed in one room and were treated like real criminals. They were arrested in their homes, taken to the local police station, fingerprinted, photographed and placed in a file. Subsequently, they were blindfolded and taken to a basement of Stanford University used as a prison, doors and windows

experiments one of the possible interpretations may be to consider that tyranny, dictatorship or simply obedience to an institution is due to an active identification with who promotes cruel actions covering them as virtuous actions. Hannah Arendt in “The banality of evil” highlights how the various actions carried out by men who had to follow orders do not constitute responsibilities for the crimes committed against the Jews²⁶ while Browning’s *Ordinary Men* makes it clear how acts of the CI battalion of the German Police Reserve, a Nazi unit, were carried out only to execute orders²⁷.

Men, therefore, who were not “addicted to evil” and who in other contexts and circumstances also presented forms of empathy and who, in particular situations, lacked it. We must ask ourselves, then, whether it is more correct to speak of “evil”, “cruelty” or the absence of empathy. S. Baron- Cohen’s theory postulates the idea that actions devoid of empathy are simply the tail of a bell curve that is found in all populations on the planet. The psychologist claims that every human being is within a spectrum of empathy and that exaggerated evilness or infinite goodness are nothing more than the extremes of the empathy spectrum. The word empathy has been object of several definitions, Baron-Cohen’s seems to cover a point that has not been highlighted in other descriptions, or if it has been done it has been done quite implicitly. The author argues that empathy is our ability to identify what someone else is feeling, or even thinking, and responding to those thoughts and feelings with emotional equivalent. From the statement cited above

barred, bare walls, cells for a maximum of three inmates. A storage closet of about 60 cm was then used as an isolation cell, called “the hole”. The prisoners forcibly wore a uniform with a number, it was the first step towards the cancellation of personal identity, a heavy chain was placed on their right ankle, and they had to follow a series of strict rules. The guards, on the other hand, had a whistle, mirrored sunglasses, uniforms and truncheons and had ample room to intervene to enforce the rules, without however using physical violence. In a short time, each of them totally identified with the role they assumed, some guards went so far as to carry out deplorable actions and some inmates felt the discomfort deeply, leading to symptoms of stress and depression. The experiment was therefore stopped. Cfr. P. ZIMBARDO, *L’effetto Lucifero. Cattivi si diventa?* Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2008.

²⁶ Cfr. H. ARENDT, *La banalità del male. Eichmann a Gerusalemme*, trad. it., Milano, Universale economica Feltrinelli, 2009 [1963]

²⁷ Cfr. C.R. BROWNING, *Uomini comuni. Polizia tedesca e soluzione finale in Polonia*, trad. it., Torino, Einaudi, 1995 [1992].

it can be seen that empathy has often been defined as “the ability to recognize the emotions of another one”, leaving out an equally important aspect, that of offering a response, specifically an emotional one. This consideration pushes us to ask ourselves whether we are self-centred (*single-minded*) or other-centred (*double-minded*) beings. In the first case the attention is concentrated only in personal interests, attention, personal desires, in the second case they refer to the other person. Empathy, therefore, can be “turned on” or “turned off”, there are people directed towards the other or “imprisoned” within themselves²⁸.

The first consideration to make to better understand the possibility of becoming empathic subjects is of a neurobiological nature. There is a so-called “empathy circuit”, roughly made up of about ten interconnected brain regions and the first of these is the *medial prefrontal cortex* (MPFC), a sort of “hub” for processing social information and to compare one’s point of view with the others’ one²⁹. Therefore, if an ethics of neuroscience implies the moral lawfulness of scientific discoveries, the neuroscience of ethics is useful for understanding and guiding moral behaviours³⁰.

It is not a question of arguing that the cortex has the ability to exercise moral judgments but rather of associating emotional aspects and cognitive aspects, understanding how one decides what is illicit and what is not, what pushes one to take one action rather than another and the possibility of reading the *places* of the brain in more detail through brain maps associated with decision-making processes, evaluations and social behaviours. The MPFC is divided into a dorsal part (*dorso-medial prefrontal cortex*, dMPFC) and a ventral part (*ventro-medial prefrontal cortex*, vMPFC). The first is involved in the representation of the thoughts and feelings of others, the second refers to the use for one’s own mind³¹.

²⁸ S. BARON-COHEN, *La scienza del male. L’empatia e le origini della crudeltà*, trad. it., Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2012 [2011], pp. 13-17.

²⁹ Ivi, pp. 23-27.

³⁰ M. SANTERINI, *Educazione morale e neuroscienze. La coscienza dell’empatia*, Brescia, La Scuola, 2011, p. 7.

³¹ S. BARON-COHEN, *Op. cit.*, pp. 23-29.

The latter, following the discoveries of A. Damasio, is also responsible for memorizing an emotional value. In particular, Damasio's *somatic marker* idea is based on the fact that emotions *mark* certain aspects of a situation and generate certain outcomes of the subject's possible actions in association with somatic responses. The *somatic marker*

forces attention on the negative outcome (for example, when you have to give an answer to solve a problem and you feel an unpleasant sensation in your stomach opening) to which a given action can lead and acts as an automatic alarm signal: beware of the danger that awaits you if you choose the option that leads to this outcome³².

The theory of somatic markers allows us to understand how «the mechanisms for reading one's own mind and that of others are oriented»³³. It is, therefore, the same evolution of the brain which through its functioning becomes "responsible" for the activation of the empathic circuit and, beyond any brain impairments such as to determine a *zero degree of empathy*, positive as in the cases of autism – reduced empathic capacity and absence of "badness" and negativity as in the cases of borderline personalities or psychopaths – not feeling anything on an emotional level - it is education that plays a big role in the development of empathy and, therefore, also of development morality connected to it. J. Rifkin maintains that, if mirror neurons represent the predetermined possibility of learning empathy, it is the context that then offers the possibility of developing empathy itself³⁴.

Without empathy it is very unlikely that people will develop a moral sense without which human decline and loss are inevitable. Emancipation from oneself and from others, from external conditioning, from excessive instinctual

³² A. DAMASIO, *L'errore...*, cit. p. 245.

³³ M. SANTERINI, *Op. cit.*, p. 52.

³⁴ J. RIFKIN, *Op. cit.*, pp. 76-97.

dependence implies a path aimed at ethics, morality, the acquisition of those values without which one would be deprived of an existential and cultural posture and, therefore, educational action and moral action coincide in this sense. It is a question of going beyond Kolberg's lesson according to which it is through model that values are learned and arriving at an ethics of care which has in rationality, typical of the moral subject, the key principle through which one becomes aware that one's universe of values cannot be imposed on others³⁵ to promote what Recalcati calls the *humanization of life*³⁶. To deal with forms of "moral autism", education must therefore ask itself where to find the ethical codes and rules of moral conduct. One possibility is offered by the "natural dimension of empathy", which implies our belonging to the entire human family, although it should be underlined, as previously mentioned, that only a mature stage of empathy allows us to distinguish what happens to another and what happens to us, to decentralize ourselves from an egocentric vision that usually accompanies us. Suspension of one's own needs to understand the other which embodies the idea of *feeling* considered as a natural characteristic which allows the educational process to transform automatic empathy into moral internalisation. It is necessary to offer a new key to understanding moral education which should not be considered as an a-priori but as an openness, a possibility towards certain choices which cannot be attributed only to nature³⁷ since education "based on an ethical approach, not only explains, but above all makes us "experience" the meaning of the other by discovering and attributing value to personal experience³⁸ since empathy is a constitutive element of an intersubjective world, it allows to feel that the other has emotions, thoughts, personality. We move in the orbit of recognizing the *other* as an *absolute value*, not objectivized, not dehumanized. Recognizing the other is the specific character of empathy which represents the discovery of our existence

³⁵ S. BROTTTO, *Etica della cura*, Salerno, Orthotes editrice, 2013, pp. 45-60.

³⁶ Cfr. M. RECALCATI, *L'ora di lezione. Per un'erotica dell'insegnamento*, Torino, Einaudi, 2014.

³⁷ M. SANTERINI, *Op. cit.*, pp. 132-140.

³⁸ Ivi, pp. 141-142.

together with others and elects the space of the relationship³⁹, every human activity is, therefore, an incarnated experience, that is of sharing with others and symbolizes a direct challenge to the old norms of science and of the reason. Incarnated experience marks the entry into the empathy era and, given that empathic expansion not only allows one to experience the suffering or condition of the other «as if» it were one's own, but also contributes to strengthen and deepen one's sense of self⁴⁰, this will help to overcome those actions of defeat, humiliation, annihilation of the other who reside in one of the many *non-places of the soul*⁴¹.

³⁹ L. BOELLA, *Op. cit.*, pp. 87-92.

⁴⁰ J. RIFKIN, *Op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁴¹ A. VERSACE, *I non-luoghi dell'anima*, in «Ricerche di pedagogia e didattica», 12, 2, 2017, pp. 215-227.

