

## **Affective neuroscience and clinical implications. The drama of the relation in the therapeutic scene**

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**ABSTRACT.** – The relationship is contingent, it precedes and founds every individuation and is the place of the analytical field and the source of effectiveness of the clinic, of psychoanalysis, and of psychotherapy. The relationship has to do with the value of the instant, that is, of the instances that emerge ‘here and now’ and with the ways of dealing with them. As regards empathy, we know with certain evidence that it is not recognition that allows sharing: in an empathic relationship, exactly the opposite happens. It is only thanks to sharing that the recognition of the other as our peer is possible and, therefore, we obtain evidence of the interpersonal world that is natural for us precisely because we resonate with that evidence, it is not alien to us, and it is not a problem to be solved. The other is not an enigma to be deciphered with the aid of a theory. Through the relationship, which is constitutive and is proposed as an embodied simulation, a structural coupling occurs that connects the internal states of the active-perceptive systems with the external states to generate dynamic evolution, while trying to preserve the structural and functional integrity of the system. Internal and external, circularly connected, become a unitary and inseparable phenomenology in the therapeutic relationship.

*Key words:* relationship, empathy, analytical field, setting, experience.

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## The relation, the subjects and the scene



*"I have never had, and still do not have, the perception of my personal identity.  
I see myself as the place where something happens, but there is no 'I', no 'me'.  
Each of us is a kind of crossroads where things happen.  
The crossroads is absolutely passive: something happens there.  
Other things, equally important, happen elsewhere.  
There is no choice: it is a matter of pure chance."*  
Claude Lévi-Strauss

This photograph shows a young Claude Lévi-Strauss on a field trip during his anthropological mission, and this one shot does justice to the sugared hagiography of the romanticized and idealized narratives that have presented the work of the anthropologist and how the relations with the populations observed and studied were managed. From the 'purity' of the detached and interpreting gaze, which aimed to produce objective ethnographic reports capable of analyzing and explaining the cultures of other peoples; from the representation of the *setting* with its idealized environments, its refined notes and pencils, its participant observation; from Bronislaw Malinowski's problem: how to transform a personal experience into objective knowledge, to Malinowski's own Diary, where the uncertainties, the moments of difficulty and despair, stumbling as one moves forward, the hardships of living in the field, worrying that one might not understand anything, writing as narration, all of the above emerge ultimately as the very condition of anthropological

work. It is a story that contains many indications and evidence regarding the uncertainty of any relational approximation, whether with a complex cultural expression or with another person.

In therapeutic relations, we all register the continuous shift from forms of self-referentiality to the risk of getting lost along the paths of the other while continuing to appeal to a purity that claims methodological objectivity and linearity of action.

In both cases we are vulnerable, in the wilderness of differences and approximation.

Our origins, habits, how we perceive ourselves, our height, the colour of our eyes, and the type of body we wear in the therapeutic relation. How we talk. We torment ourselves with the models to adopt, with behavioural myths, and by comparing ourselves to those who have analyzed us; with idols that often painfully revisit our mistakes and failures.

And that path also involves those facing us, those who, while putting their dreams into play, do not control their ghosts and idols. How can we contain ourselves and others who turn to us to be contained if this diversity deeply marks us? We are almost always faced with those who cannot come to terms with their difference on their own and are afraid of it. We are always two bodies, with their distinctions, their struggles, and their expectations, and in particular with the anxiety of being there, in that context and at that moment.

An increasingly influential school of thought in the sciences of the mind sees the mind as embodied, extended, and distributed rather than linked only to neurons and to the brain, or 'all in the head'. This shift in perspective raises important questions about the relation between cognition and material culture, posing great challenges to psychoanalysis, philosophy, cognitive science, archaeology, and anthropology. These challenges also extend to clinical practice if we consider the link between body-brain-mind, the relations, movement, and contexts; in other words, if we redefine the boundaries of the *setting*. Lambros Malafouris (2013) proposes an interdisciplinary analytical framework in order to investigate the ways in which things have become cognitive extensions of the human body. The same applies to contexts. The theory of material involvement definitively adds materiality – the world of things, material artefacts, and signs, as well as contexts – to the cognitive equation. His account not only challenges conventional intuition about the boundaries and location of the human mind but also suggests the need to rethink classical archaeological assumptions about human cognitive evolution.

According to the innovative approach of Malafouris (2013) and of MET (*Material Engagement Theory*), material objects and contexts are part of the human mind. MET has three fundamental principles:

1. Cognition is extended and enacted because material forms are part of the mind, and cognition is the interaction between brain, body, and material forms.

2. Materiality generates action because it is able to influence change in the brain and in behaviour.
3. Meaning (signification) emerges through the active engagement of material forms.

Important concepts developed by Malafouris include:

- *Metaplasticity*, the idea that the plastic human mind ‘is embedded and inextricably enfolded in a plastic material culture’ (*Ibid.*, 2013).
- *Thinging*, the idea that human beings think *with* and *through* material things.

Even the construct of identity not only fades in individuation but also dissolves in the context of relations between bodies in motion, allowing we-centered spaces to emerge and constitute the drama of the therapeutic dynamics. Indeed, the search for identity arose and still arises from the profound realisation that this is an impossible phenomenology, just as it is impossible to have a love that is always perfect. The word ‘identity’ is a paroxysm because there is never anything identical in ourselves, except the narcissistic arrogance that wishes to suppress the other and imagines it is doing so out of love, assimilating it in itself with the perverse wish to believe that love for the other is at bottom love for oneself. It is with the other, in the relation with the other in a context, that doors can be opened, that the different, the outsider, the unknown enter within, allowing us to acknowledge the parts of ourselves that we would never have known.

In the contexts of life and in the clinical setting, the affirmation of a corporeal paradigm (Gallese & Morelli, 2024) is closely related to movement, real or simulated. It is not only the subjects that are relevant but also the scene and the context, their atmospheres, the emotional environment in which the conditions of individuation and re-individuation appear and emerge. In a word, the ‘we-centered’ space is relevant, in which the ‘we’ countenances the relational, affective, emotional conditions for the emergence and re-emergence of singularity and singular re-organization and re-regulation.

## Hypotheses

*Relation and empathy are taken into consideration, but as accessories in psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic practice, and the epistemology of complexity, although acknowledged on a formal level, has not become foundational in practice, and consequently, remote interpretation is still widespread.*

As Octavio Paz wrote (The Dissident Intellectual, 26 May 2014): “When a society becomes corrupt, it is language that decays first. The critique of society, therefore, begins with grammar and the re-establishment of meanings”.

Language is not just words but gestures, postures, contexts, and settings. If we ask ourselves how scientific thought evolves, an often overlooked but

not insignificant aspect concerns the orientations and theories that are characterized as being ahead of their time. There are certain scientific creations and theoretical constructs that are characterized as being premature or anticipatory (Stent, 1972). In such cases, the scientific community finds it difficult to acknowledge their value and is particularly committed to tracing the implications of those creations and constructs back to the canonical knowledge of the field of reference. This is not the only reaction to a paradigmatic innovation in the field of science. At times, open hostility occurs, as well as a commitment to denial of what is proposed as discontinuous and innovative. Similarly, there may be only a formal and lexical adoption of the innovations and transformations introduced by a new scientific creation or a new theoretical construct. Perhaps the greatest difficulties arise, however, with regard to the affirmation of a new paradigm, when the concepts and words used remain essentially the same, but their meaning is profoundly transformed by the results of the research. In the latter cases, it is thought by most that an actual transformation has taken place, but it is not, in point of fact, a real performativity, only an apparent evolution. After all, as Judith Butler (1997) clearly stated, the performative acts in ways that no conscious intention can completely determine:

“The performative is not a singular act used by an already existing subject, but one of the powerful and insidious ways in which subjects are called into social existence, from a variety of widespread and powerful interpretations. In this sense, the social performative is a crucial part not only of the formation of the subject but also of the continuing political dispute and reformulation of the subject. The performative is not only a ritual practice: it is one of the influential rituals through which subjects are formed and reformulated.” (Butler, 1997, p. 229)

Communities and groups of professionals and researchers do not get by on *already existing* subjects; they elaborate belonging, *i.e.*, subjectification and subjection, while everyone becomes himself or herself in the group and forms the group, *i.e.*, performs while being performed. In this sense, the *habitus* is formed, but it is also *formative*. It is in this sense that the corporeal *habitus* constitutes a tacit form of performativity. “No spoken act can fully control or determine the rhetorical effects of the speaking body. It is also scandalous because the bodily action of words is not mechanically predictable” (Butler, 1997, p. 223).

Think of the words ‘relation’, ‘empathy’, ‘interpretation’, ‘context’, or ‘setting’, their shared meanings and the actions they bring into play in psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic practices. Language is vulnerability that enables. It lives at the temperature of its continuous deconstruction, of the conflict of meanings it manages to contain, of the performativity it manages to accommodate. The word ‘relation’ and the so-called relational approach have been present in the psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic discourse for a long time. It would suffice to consider two aspects, one paradoxical and the

other tragic, to recognize the difficulties of its effective affirmation and its predominantly formal adoption. The paradox is quickly stated and is summed up in a question: which other approach could exist in a discipline and practice where the relation is constitutive? The tragedy lies in the lives excluded, offended, and to a large extent destroyed by seriously positing the relation and its transference and counter-transference reciprocity not as an accessory but as a condition of psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic praxis. We need only turn to the examples of S. Ferenczi (1932) and his research on the reciprocal analysis between patient and analyst; the relation and dialogue in the unconscious, what communicates beyond words; and the respect for pain and the ineluctability of its function as the subject of the healing process. The work of H. S. Sullivan, on the interpersonal and relational analysis and attention to the patient's relational processes; but also on the elaboration of the therapist's 'selective inattentions' to his own relational processes, which then become part of the therapeutic process. The work of L. M. Pagliarani, on the original relation and source of every problem and every possibility; on the critique of interpretation as analytical practice; on the development of the perspective of project psychotherapy.

The relation does not intervene as an accessory at the service of the subjects, who then activate or deactivate it on the basis of cognitive and intentional choices; it cannot, therefore, be reduced to a supportive choice of the relation that intervenes in the analytical field. We have increasingly detailed experimental evidence of the precedence of the relation in individuation and subjectivation. Indeed, we know that there is no subjectification except the subjection that every relation, in itself asymmetrical, implies, with the power dynamics that define its incidence in the experience of those involved. It is the relation, therefore, that comes before the subject, that precedes and grounds its constraints and possibilities of individuation. The question shifts and evolves from focusing on when and how to activate the relation to the search for ways to inhabit the relation in the analytical field (see for similar views Civitarese, 2023). According to a corporeal paradigm, the relation is primarily embodied and involves bodies in the first place. Particularly in the therapeutic relation, where one person hands himself over to another in order to be helped to cure himself, the body is not, as it is not in any other case, a servomechanism to carry the mind around.

The relation is contingent; it has to do with the value of the moment, *i.e.*, of the instances that emerge 'here and now' and with the ways of dealing with them. In the first part of one of his invaluable texts, Vladimir Jankélévitch states that "Every moment, in itself, is futile and deserves no more than amused attention, but the totality of successive moments withstands our humor"; instead, "living remains a serious problem" (Jankélévitch, 1997, p. 33). Instinctively, one would be inclined to agree with his moral philosophizing. Proposing a reversal of perspectives and conceptions – among other



things, in line with what Jankélévitch states in one of his most important texts, *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien* (Jankélévitch, 2011) – if the moment itself were really so futile, then we would not devote to it our effort of creative and reasoned irony. On the contrary, the time of the instant is extremely serious, because it is the only moment between the already-been and the not-yet in which consciousness is given the opportunity to express itself, to act, to choose; the time of the instant is literally a matter of life and death, in the sense that in the next instant, another opportunity will perhaps be given to us – but that specific opportunity, characterized by those typical traits and not by others, will never come again. This is the presentist being of Luigi M. Pagliarani. Life, by appearing on the balcony and looking out to an indefinite and manipulable future, is perhaps a light matter; but at that moment, we sense the threatening warning of an urgent and unavoidable duty, and we are required to act with the generous attention of which irony is but one possible declination in the never sufficient articulation and differentiation of languages of the therapeutic relation.

As far as empathy is concerned, there is some evidence to show that it is not recognition that enables sharing; in an empathic relation, exactly the opposite happens. It is only through sharing that recognition of the other as our fellow human being is possible and, therefore, we obtain evidence of the interpersonal world that is natural to us precisely because we resonate with that evidence, it is not alien to us and is not a problem to be solved. The other is not an enigma to be deciphered with the aid of a theory; there is no epistemic gulf to be bridged, as would happen, as a necessary consequence, from an idea of the interpersonal relation centered exclusively on the relationship between two cogito. Insofar as the cogito is not immediately accessible to us, we would have a problem to solve, and in that case, it can only be solved by resorting to a theory of the other cogito, that is, of the other self, of the other subject. We see, then, how empathy is a phenomenon, a mode of relation that cannot exist apart from the relation. Whereas an inter-individual relation based on the cogito, *i.e.*, on the exclusively cognitive apparatus that puts the body in brackets, would lead to knowledge between two solipsisms. The perspective advocated by classical cognitivism, which is the basis of the cognitive-behavioural approach and others, thus becomes highly problematic and requires one to devise all the complicated logical-inferential paraphernalia that many believe is the only key to accessing the world of the other and goes by the name of theory of mind. We are not claiming that the other is always unambiguously accessible from within by resorting to empathy. In many situations in daily life, what the other does, expresses, or says is enigmatic to us. Often ‘the numbers don’t add up’, as they say. A ‘yes’ accompanied by a certain facial attitude or uttered with a certain intonation leads us to question whether the other person really means what they are saying. At that point, the other urges us to

investigate further, to carefully examine the reasons why he or she may have meant 'no' while actually saying 'yes'. A more frankly hermeneutic-theoretical approach is undoubtedly useful at this juncture. However, scientific evidence suggests that this theoretical approach to the other, still dominant in the theories of many cognitive scientists and in many ways of understanding and practising psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, is not the main form of understanding the other, and perhaps not even the most important one. Following on from this development, empathy has become a fundamental theme of phenomenological reflection. If we start with Husserl, the founder of this current of philosophical thinking, we can recognize how he came to find himself in an almost irresolvable dilemma. If, on the one hand, we want to privilege the phenomenon, *i.e.*, how the world appears to us, momentarily putting reality out there in brackets in order to concentrate on the way it manifests itself to us, on the other hand, we must find, through the scientific method, a way to understand the world. Once the problem has been posed, a conflict emerges that is not easy to resolve, that of the world as it appears phenomenally to the other and, therefore, how each one of us relates to the other's phenomenal experience of the world. Husserl, but above all his pupil Edith Stein, addresses the problem of understanding how an I as such can relate to another I as such. The solution proposed by phenomenology at this stage is not the cognitivist solution, *i.e.*, the relation between the two cogito, but a relation that cannot disregard what phenomenologists call the *Leib*, the living body. For that experience of the living body, we, in Italian, have no suitable word; we have to add the adjective 'vivo' to the word 'body', while in German, there are two words to designate the body: *Körper* and *Leib*. The first term, *Körper*, designates the material body, the object of study in the life sciences. The second, *Leib*, refers to the vital experience we have of the world thanks to the body. The challenge of the new science of the human, therefore, is to be able to understand the *Leib* by studying the *Körper*. In the field of experience, regardless of how the two egos connect in the inter-individual relation, in a mating or pairing relation, according to Husserl, access to the other is never direct. It is impossible for it to be direct. It can only be an appresentation, just as when we see a glass placed in front of us and we experience the glass as a complete unit; such a complete unit perceptually can only be partial because we only see the front of the glass, the side facing us. In this partial experience of the glass, the glass in its entirety as a unit is realized by us. We do not, in fact, see the front faces of objects, but we see the objects as a whole, even if we only see them partially. If we draw a parallel with the inter-individual relationship, the other appears as a whole to me. We have long criticized the idea that denies the possibility of having a direct approach to the other, because we considered empathy to be precisely the most direct way of connecting with the other, insofar as when we relate to the other, the other is



experienced through a reuse of the same neural resources that make us who we are. We have argued in favour of the hypothesis that the mechanism of embodied simulation is the most direct way there is of connecting to the other. Thinking back, however, to the way in which Husserl opposes direct perception, it is possible to cast doubt on the actual direct nature of the perception of the other guaranteed by the mechanisms of embodied simulation. Insofar as a direct perception of the other results in its transparency, which, of course, is not assured, what does the lack of transparency mean? It becomes clear, however, that in every relation the connection with the other, even if it takes place at a level of quasi-parity (Husserl speaks of *Paarung*, *i.e.*, pairing), must always preserve the other's dimension of otherness. The other is not our carbon copy, the reflection in all respects perfectly coinciding with us. In this regard, many misunderstandings also arise in the interpretation of the mirroring mechanism because when we speak of a mirror, we speak of something that merely returns the image automatically and as a conforming copy of what it reflects. But mirroring mechanisms and embodied simulation do not work this way. This has been observed both in individual macaque neurons and in the human brain. Mirror neurons are, in fact, systematically activated with greater intensity when the macaque performs the action than when he sees it performed by another. Similarly, the brain circuits in our brain's mirror system that are activated during our actions, emotions, or sensations do so with greater intensity than when we witness the actions or experience the emotions and sensations of others. These mechanisms, in other words, are inherently capable of distinguishing our experiences from those of the other with whom we enter into a relation. The other, in the relation, is never our copy. Beyond these important functional differences that show how the mirroring mechanism and embodied simulation do not produce rigid copies of the other, there is a deeper reason that prevents a direct perception of those with whom we enter into a relation. The inter-individual relation always involves a difference: while relating to the other, the self always acts as the pivot of the relation. This stems from the fact that experience is always *someone's*. If experience is always *someone's*, the resources each person uses to connect with the other's experience are the result of how each person has constructed their own experience. The self is the center of gravity that connects in the empathic relation with the other because the self is dynamically constituted by all the previous relations in which it has been involved. The empathic relation, as Merleau-Ponty argues, is always a chiasmatic, *i.e.*, reciprocal, relation. Our body is always the only possible point of judgement and the only yardstick of experience that constitutes our connection with the other. So much so that when we connect with the other, our motor system resonates more clearly, whereas it is less activated when we are not directly actors in the action but only observers. Similarly, when, for example, we see a caress or a slap on some-

one's face, our somatosensory systems resonate with the other's tactile experience by simulating it, and we empathise with the other, understanding that a caress is different from a slap. In these situations, our somatosensory system is activated to a lesser extent and in a partially different way than when we directly experience touch. The brain circuits connected with emotion and affectivity that are activated when we witness, for example, the disgust or pain of others are activated in a similar way, but with reduced intensity and connections to other parts of the brain, compared to when it is we who are experiencing the physical experience of disgust or pain. When we empathise with someone who shows disgust and thus recognize, through that partial sharing, their disgust, we do not experience physical disgust. Our personal way of entering into the disgust or pain of others cannot take place except by using the simulation mechanisms that have been shaped as a result of our personal experiences of disgust and our personal experiences of pain. Husserl (1929) is, therefore, right: our perception of the other is never direct because the experiential contents of the other's pain are somehow precluded from us – we understand that they have pain, but we are unable to determine what the other is feeling at that moment; we can approximate what they are feeling in some way, but only by using as a test-bench, as a test, our own experience of pain, our experience of joy, our experience of anger, or our experience of disgust. Although there is a differential dimension that produces otherness at the level of experience – it is the other who is ill, it is the other who is happy, it is the other who is angry, it is the other who is afraid – otherness is built on a relation of similarity, of co-participation. And who do we share with? Who, if not an 'I'? Each 'I' is, and is not, the other. Each one of us is constituted through relations, constructing oneself with those 'bodily bricks' that we all have, universally, but through which different architectures can be built, because the 'I', the architecture produced by life experiences, is always different. Our most intimate access to the other is through empathy, that is, through embodied simulation that allows us to reuse part of the brain circuits that underlie our experience of the world to attribute similar experiences to the other. The other is always an 'as-if'. Thanks to the empathic relation, the other is 'at hand', *zu-handen*, as Heidegger would have put it. But as we have seen, the relation with the other can be more complicated. Empathy may not be enough. At that point, the other is no longer 'at hand' but 'before the hand', *i.e.*, *vor-handen*, to continue with the distinction introduced by Heidegger; the other becomes an object to be interpreted, given that it is inaccessible from within *via* the modality of empathic experience. At that point, the other becomes a problem to be solved, someone on whom to exercise all the cognitive tools we have at our disposal. According to the perspective, we are proposing, the 'flesh' Merleau-Ponty speaks of constitutes our 'bricks', our bodily self, the core, the scaffolding that integrates the multiplicity of sensory stimuli in

which we are immersed, the perspective angle from which we look at the world and from which we interact with it. As soon as one says ‘self’, it often automatically occurs to many that one is thinking of something pre-constituted and rigid. Indeed, even when one speaks of a scaffold, one thinks of a rigid and unchanging structure. Instead, the self is dynamic and closely connected to neuroplasticity and relation. If we go back to the flesh, starting from the body, we take a step forward because we have a chiasmatic relation with the other, a relation of reciprocity. *The reciprocity in the empathic relation lies in the fact that what the other shows me allows me to understand something about myself.* The value and meaning of the chiasmatic relation are formalised in the evidence that, as Merleau-Ponty wrote, it is as if the gestures of another inhabit our gestures, and our gestures inhabit theirs. Motor potentials allow pairing, empathy; they connect us with the other. The one who connects with the other is each one of us, but each one of us is, in turn, the product of the empathic relations established throughout our lives and our ontogenetic development guided by our relations with the other. Each one of us, therefore, understands the other through the ways in which the other has formed him or her, but the one who understands is a different ‘I’ from the other. What characterizes us humans is this continuous process of individuation in difference, in which difference and individuation are contingently present in order for a human being to give himself and become himself.

On the subject of interpretation, we know that what we call ‘theoreticism’ today, or over-interpretation, was one of the classic objections directed to Freud regarding his failure in the Dora case. Confining a person’s narrative to a pre-established theoretical scheme is one of the most frequently encountered risks, which neglects the relation and its emergent properties, here and now, as if the clinical sessions were not an encounter but the result of the clinician’s model. Moreover, in speaking of reciprocal analysis, Sandor Ferenczi had created the scandal, which he paid dearly, of a cure founded on the encounter and the continuous questioning of the figure and competence of the analyst. This centering of the clinical relationship on interpretation comes at the expense of the constitutive ambiguity of that relation and of the patient’s embodied and irreducible experience caused by a reductionism that neutralises and flattens. Towards the end of his life, Freud confirms his brilliant scientific depth and manages to revise his own perspective and theoretical and methodological framework, precisely with regard to interpretation. He does so by analyzing the failure of the well-known case of Dora. The new translation of *Konstruktionen in der Analyse*, re-translated by Francesco Barale together with Ingrid Hennemann Barale, proposes a comparison of the previous two translations: the *Standard English Edition* and *Sigmund Freud’s Works* in Italian (Freud, 1937; Barale, 2024). The wisdom of the translators helps us understand many things about

the concepts the author wished to highlight, and substantial differences emerge in the sense and meaning of clinical practice and the therapeutic relation. Two examples will suffice as direct examples.

If we consider the German term *Aufheben*, the Italian term generally used in translation is ‘*superamento*’ (overcoming). If, however, as Freud himself stated, the symptom is a compromising formation, the presence of two or more conflicting affective instances, the irruption into one’s existence of something insuperable, it cannot be treated with a perspective and objective of dialectic overcoming. Its obstinate presence indicates the relevance, for the clinical relationship, of treating it by inhabiting its permanence within the difference.

The term *Erraten*, which in the English text is rendered with ‘*to make out*’ and in the Italian with ‘*to discover*’, in the new translation is correctly and surprisingly rendered with ‘*to guess*’. In comparing the analyst’s work to that of the archaeologist, Freud highlights the difficulty linked to the materials emerging from the therapeutic conversation: dreams, fragments of memory, and transference conditions, which prevent the completion of the reconstruction work or make it impossible, because every emergence is also constitutively a covering up. In short, Freudian guessing seems to refer to a discernable archaeology of the clinical relation. Barale points out that Freud reminds us of something that should be obvious: both protagonists participate in the analysis, the patient as well as the analyst, each of whom brings their own viewpoint. In order to try to somehow fill in the gaps of those uncertain remains, “to give form to this raw material, to turn it into what we hope for”, the analyst need only exercise what Musatti called his “creative imagination, guided by his unconscious”: “He must,” Freud writes, “guess or, rather, construct”.

So, can we still speak of interpretation, or are the constructions that take place in the analysis session something else? In *Constructions in analysis* Freud places the therapeutic relationship at the center and proposes a cognitive domain that presents no truth outside the encounter between the analyst’s unconscious and that of the subject attending therapy. A third truth emerges, which does not correspond to the patient’s symptom nor to the therapist’s abstract knowledge, a thirdness irreducible to univocity, as Pietro Barbetta argues. The analyst’s intuition, which intervenes in the ‘guessing’, must encounter the patient’s consent and come as close as possible to the other’s story. The therapeutic relationship becomes a constructivist one that creates emergencies above the naive view of reality as a correspondence between words and things. Starting with the failed treatment of Dora, the young Ida Bauer, and acknowledging the limits of interpretation in analysis, Freud approaches a manner of psychotherapy based on co-construction, therapeutic curiosity, and greater intervention by the analyst in the session. Thus, interpretation is no longer what it used to be, it loses its status as sup-

posed separate knowledge, to be shared between expert therapists, and acquires the privilege of becoming a therapeutic conversation.

The context or 'setting' is not just any space, nor is it the place of linearity, but is more and more clearly proposed as a field. The field is a 'living space' within which psychological factors act to influence individual behaviour in the relational contingency. The relation between individuals and the psychological environment composes the living space permeated from the outside, from the world. The field is porous and not watertight. The different regions in which the space is articulated have positive value if they contain a desired object; they have negative value if they present an object to be avoided. This corresponds to forces of attraction and repulsion, described through specific vectors. The psychic energy that develops within the field determines the balance of the entire system at all times.

The emergence of a discontinuity or an unseen need necessarily activates a dynamic process that will lead to a new field organization. In the clinical field, the field theory has been taken up in particular by Gestalt psychotherapy, in which the organization of the field is strongly connected not only to the emerging need or to the interrupted task but more generally to the experience arising from the patient-therapist-setting relation. The focus is, therefore, on the experience of the contact margin in the therapeutic relation as the interface between inter-subjectivity and the world of meanings.

The basic emotions activated by the relation constitute some of the main systems capable of guiding the therapeutic relation

Research into the neurobiological basis of affectivity and its implications for the psychological and psychoanalytic clinic proposes, to some extent, a new way of looking at the brain and its relation to the psyche. In many respects, these are not only innovative theories, but it is possible to glimpse the conditions for a conceptual revolution, which, while removing neuroscience from the tyranny of a cognitive-behaviourist approach, may open the way to a fruitful integration between neuroscience and the psychological and psychoanalytical clinic.

Exploration of the cerebral bases of emotions and affectivity can go beyond a view that basically conforms to the dominant cognitivist paradigm, working towards the recognition of a corporeal and relational paradigm founded on affectivity.

Following Jaak Panksepp's research, which is mainly based on the analysis of the behaviour and brain processes in animals, of particular relevance to understanding the relation between affective neuroscience and the clinic is the study of the very ancient and deep part of the brain, the seat of instinctive behaviour and homeostatic and visceral regulation. This area of

the brain, located between the spinal cord and the two cerebral hemispheres, is referred to by Panksepp as the *core-Self* area, because in it resides the instinctual and archetypal core of the individual personality (MacLean, 1990; Panksepp, 2004). Not only is it the seat of all the organism's vital functions, but it is also the place where certain brain circuits responsible for generating basic emotional dispositions and an ancestral form of affective consciousness are located.

Dispelling the prejudice that emotions, particularly animal emotions, are illusory concepts outside the realm of scientific research, advances in neurobiology and neuroscience have brought us closer to a structured understanding of the biology and psychology of emotions.

Jaak Panksepp has provided the most up-to-date information on the operating systems of the brain that organize the base emotional tendencies of all mammals. Panksepp approaches emotions from the perspective of base emotion theory but does not fail to address the complex issues raised by constructivist approaches. These issues include the relation with human consciousness and the psychiatric implications of this knowledge. By positing the affective dimension as the energetic and organizational center of the psyche, Panksepp replaces Descartes' "I think therefore I am" with "I feel therefore I am", challenging the very core of dominant cognitivist theories. Moreover, his approach questions certain principles of Freudian metapsychology, according to which consciousness is located on the surface, *i.e.*, at the point of contact with the external world, at the level of perception, while the instinctual and drive matrix would be devoid of any form of consciousness and psychic intentionality.

According to the cognitivist perspective, experience acts on the brain in such a way as to modify the operational rules inscribed in its neuroplastic structure. Although experimental studies and neuroscientific theories focusing on consciousness and emotions have proliferated in recent times, if we take a closer look at all these contributions, we very often realize that they move within the cognitivist paradigm.

Antonio Damasio's conception of emotions and consciousness is certainly closer to Panksepp's, especially with regard to the centrality he attributes to emotional feelings and the subjective dimension of experience. However, in line with the theoretical tradition of William James, emotional feelings are considered the reflection of an integrated neuropsychic representation of bodily changes, especially visceral ones, that have been automatically triggered by certain neuronal centers. Emotions are the 'feelings of what has taken place in the body', and affective consciousness is merely the result of neuronal patterns of the organism's internal state. At bottom, then, Damasio's conception continues to be linked to a purely cognitivist viewpoint, in that it reduces feeling to a cognitive schema, or map, or representation.

On the contrary, adopting a philosophical perspective known as dual-



aspect monism, first elaborated by Baruch Spinoza, the subjective experience on the one hand, and the set of neural processes on the other, are parallel manifestations of a single reality that appears differently depending on the observer's point of view. Emotions are not so much feelings of what has happened in the body but rather feelings of what is about to happen or could happen in a field that includes the organism and its environment. Indeed, emotions have an anticipatory function and guide behaviour along particular adaptive paths that have been preserved in the course of natural evolution. Therefore, affections are primarily directions of meaning. Indeed, they are the primary directions of meaning of consciousness. From the dual aspect, Panksepp considers affective feelings as a philosophical position first elaborated by Baruch Spinoza and recently revived within the Neuro-psychoanalysis movement.

Basic emotional dispositions direct behaviour along certain preferred paths, without rigidly predetermining individual conduct. Each emotion has its own specific adaptive purpose. Desire-seeking drives the organism to explore the environment and seek out what it needs. Fear drives the organism to avoid danger. Anger drives it to aggression and destruction of a source of danger or frustration. Panic/anxiety from separation signals the need for a figure that protects and cares for you. Love-caring urges one to provide protection and care. Sexual lust drives towards mating and reproduction. Joy-playing drives the interaction between conspecifics, especially in younger children. In Panksepp's view, processes in the neurodynamic field linked to an emotional state or disposition act like 'inner demons' that not only move the organism towards the outside world but at the same time structure a specific field of consciousness, conditioning everything that can be perceived, imagined, or thought.

### *Panksepp and dynamic psychology*

As can be inferred, the contribution of Panksepp's research and theoretical insights to clinical psychology is enormous. He identified a number of neurochemical circuits responsible for the attachment relation, such as the oxytocin system and the endogenous opiate system, which are part of two primary Emotional Systems: love-caring and panic from separation. A problem occurring in these emotional systems, as in autism, where, due to excessive release of endorphins, the experience of separation from the mother is not felt, will inevitably affect the development of the attachment relation. Thus, the current focus on the importance of the mother-child relation in individual neuropsychic development is supported by the physiological base, and attachment can be considered a primary motivational function as the result of gradual learning supported by the Primary Emotional Systems. Demonstrating that in childhood, the free expression of playing is of fundamental importance for the development of the frontal areas of the brain, Panksepp hypothesized that the

so-called attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a consequence of a reduced expression of the emotion of joy-playing, caused by living conditions that do not favour spontaneous and impetuous interaction between children. Therefore, instead of treating the problem with amphetamines, which further inhibit the urge to play, the free expression of this emotion should instead be encouraged.

### *The theoretical perspective*

The emotion of desire-seeking is the neuro-ethological correlate of what psychoanalysts have called ‘libido’, in that it expresses the instinctual disposition that allows for an affective investment in the ‘objects’ of the external world. Moreover, as studies on dreams have shown, this emotion is also strongly activated during imaginative processes, leading to the exploration of one’s inner world and the search for internally generated stimuli. In the last fifteen years of his career, Jaak Panksepp joined the Neuro-psychoanalysis movement, founded by Mark Solms, and became one of its leading exponents. This international movement, which produces a biannual journal and organizes numerous conferences and meetings all over the world, has as its main aim the integration of neuroscience and psychoanalysis, developing a field of reflection in which experiences and clinical theories, on the one hand, and discoveries about the brain on the other, can converge. Although there is no lack of Jungian-oriented psychoanalysts in the movement, such as Margaret Wilkinson, the Freudian or post-Freudian perspective is dominant by far within Neuro-psychoanalysis circles. Thus, Panksepp’s research and theories have been interpreted predominantly from the perspective of Freudian metapsychology, often in a truly suggestive and productive manner. However, as partly noted in an article by Solms and Panksepp themselves (2012), the Neuroscience of Affectivity seriously questions certain assumptions of Freudian theory. In particular, the idea that consciousness and intentionality are exclusive prerogatives of the ego and that, therefore, psychic life takes place exclusively within its boundaries. Indeed, research on the animal brain clearly shows how emotional dispositions constitute archetypal forms of intentional consciousness, which evolutionarily and ontogenetically precede not only the rational and linguistic organization of the mind but also any sense of spatio-temporal continuity on which the ego complex is based. As hereditary prototypical experiences, affections are part of the instinctual structure of the species, but at the same time, they create the conditions for the emergence of an inter-individual psychological field, giving rise to proto-conscious states that become the background on which various personal psychic representations dwell. In this way, affectivity functions as a bridge that links the inter-subjective psyche to the objective and subjective psyche and constitutes the foundation of the individual personality (Alcaro, 2019).

## The ecstatic experience and the aesthetics of relations in the psychotherapeutic clinic

“For it seems that nothingness and emptiness – or either nothingness or emptiness – must be continuously present or latent in human life. And that in order not to be devoured by nothingness or emptiness one must make them in oneself, one must at least hold oneself back, remain in suspension, in the negative of ecstasy.” (Zambrano, 2016)

Research and analytical practice that wish to take into account the thresholds of aesthetic experience and accessibility to the dizzying zones of beauty venture into the region that, for psychoanalysis as a whole and first and foremost for Freud himself, was the region par excellence of danger, of threat, of entangling ambiguity: ecstasy. Of this fascinating journey, Elvio Fachinelli has written soberly:

“I am searching for a perceptive, emotional, cognitive layer, which has mostly been taken as a frontier area, dangerous from the point of view of the affirmation of a personal, individualized self. A layer that has perhaps for this very reason been set aside in the course of the evolution of so-called civilized man. It would be absurd to criticize or mock this setting aside, which has been a necessity for the majority of human beings. Can we state that this necessity is now no longer present? And that we can take within us, that we can fully exercise, a hitherto neglected but not absent availability? If the answer is yes, then the ecstatic, which in our civilization usually surfaces in liminal experiences, easily considered insignificant, or even non-existent, is not peculiar to eccentric experimenters, but is that which is missing from our common perception. It can begin to enter it, provided we overcome the processes of isolation and fragmentation, or even outright erasure, to which it has been subjected so far.” (Fachinelli, 2019, p. 9)

As one can easily perceive, here it is the ‘I’ that is being questioned, in its supposed granitic unity. The ‘I’ of Aristotle and Descartes that does not bear up to the recognition of the complexity of passions. Maria Zambrano again poses the question by asking what happens when:

“Love comes into play openly. And when it comes into play, whether it is declared or not, it is love that decides. And in that case there is the risk (given that for centuries, or since the beginning of what has been known as Western culture, in which mysticism has been outlawed) that it is thought to border on mysticism, to be part of it. And, if the verdict is milder, what of poetry, then the misstep would lie in the method of poetic living. To which there would be no objection if by poetic one meant what poetic, poetry, or poetizing literally mean, in other words a method that, rather than being in the creature’s consciousness, is in the creature’s being, that ventures to wake up dazzled and numb at the same time.” (Zambrano 2016, p. 8)

Some of the main acquisitions of neuroscientific research would later corroborate and support both the evidence of the precedence of the relation over the individuation of the self, and the relevance of the aesthetics of the relation as a path to access *poiesis*, the possibility of beginning to enter oneself, of beginning once again to make oneself by making one's own world.

C. Bollas, in *The Oriental Mind* (2016), argues that it is the gap between what we know and what we think, it is 'the known unthought' that is at the very heart of psychoanalytic work. At the unconscious level, the power of this experience lies in its ability to reactivate the original maternal, preverbal language, which does not revolve around explicit injunctions, arguments, or explanations but rather functions by showing in implicit form 'forms of being, thinking and relating' (*Ibid.*, 2016, p. 14). Reflective judgement, then, is not really a cognitive judgement, for it sheds no light either on the properties of the object or on our way of knowing it; rather, it allows us to grasp in *reflected* form the purpose we carry within us. This purpose, in Bollas, is the search for a sense of wholeness that is able to bring together the different parts that make up our self and give it a *unitary sense*; a sense of unity that is pure illusion but one that human beings need and that seems to become apparent when our personal *idiom* is revealed.

In the experience Bollas speaks about, it is therefore not the properties of the object in itself, nor those of the subject in itself, that count, but rather the 'intermediate space' in which their encounter takes place, which is capable of stimulating a particular revelation of the self that the object does not contain but for which it appears no less decisive. Bollas writes (2020):

"We all live among thousands of these objects that illuminate our world [that is, that have the power to shed light on our inner and outer world]: they are not hallucinations, they exist, but their essence is not what Lacan calls the real. Their meaning is to be found in what Winnicott called the 'intermediate space' or 'the third area'; the place where the subject encounters the thing, to give it its own meaning at the moment in which that being is transformed by the object. The objects of the intermediate space are formations of compromise between the mental state of the subject and the character of the thing." (*Ibid.*, 2020, p. 8)

By virtue of this power, objects perceived as evocative and transformative by the subject can enable him to 'dream his life', in the sense of applying to waking reality the same interpretative categories that apply to dreams.

Reciprocal transformation, the possibility of transcending oneself, and the experience of imagining and re-imagining oneself have their neurophysiological and phenomenological basis in what Vittorio Gallese has called the 'we-centered space' (Gallese, 2003). It is in that relational space that the conditions can be created for restoring the capacity to imagine and re-imagine oneself to those who need care in order to regain it. Over twenty years ago – and time provides a measure of the resistance to change even in the face of exper-

imental verification (one would be inclined to speak of the flat-earthers of the psyche) – Gallese investigated the ability to encode the ‘*like me*’ analogy between self and others as a fundamental prerequisite and starting point for social cognition. It is through this self/other resonance that meaningful social bonds can be established; that we can recognize others as similar to us. Based on neurophysiological and brain imaging research data with monkeys and humans, Gallese demonstrated that the ‘*like me*’ analogy can be based on a series of ‘*mirror matching mechanisms*’. By exploiting one of the main inferences from the discovery of mirror neurons (Gallese, 2001), it is possible to grasp the richness of the experiences we share with others: *the shared manifold of intersubjectivity*. On the basis of these findings, Vittorio Gallese proposes that all types of interpersonal relations (imitation, empathy, and intention attribution) depend, at a fundamental level, on the constitution of a shared manifold space. This shared space is functionally characterized by automatic and unconscious embodied simulation routines and is referred to by Gallese as ‘*we-centered space*’.

What can the other tell us about ourselves in that relational space where the we contains and supports the I in its quest for individuation? How can we allow ourselves to be porously crossed in order to translate the other’s feeling and make it compatible with a vicarious and architectural restitution in the construction of self? These are questions that take us to the heart of the great impasse of the dominant cognitivist and behaviourist perspective. The ‘litmus test’ that allows us to highlight the fallacies of mentalist and cognitivist centering on the subject is the increasing evidence of the relevance of the body and the relation in understanding what it means to be human (Gallese and Morelli, 2024).

### The impossible translation and the insuperable limit of the relation: reusing and misunderstanding in the therapeutic relation

The involvement and detachment required in the therapeutic relation are not easy to experience or practise. One finds oneself in a contingency that requires one to be simultaneously ‘near and far’, in a kind of epistemological schizophrenia in perpetual disequilibrium between participation and analytical detachment, between experiencing the other’s condition as one’s own and simultaneously treating it as a foreign object. In each encounter and in each session it is a question of experiencing a sort of exotic journey in which the analyst, the supposedly omniscient protagonist, from being a participating ‘ethnographer’ finds himself becoming ‘ethnographed’, and can either take note of this asymmetrical situation by inhabiting it, or place himself in the position of observer at a distance. In the first case, even in the insuperable limit of the relationship, something very important can happen, that is, the

intuition that his gaze is not only from near and far but is also a movement between the inside and the outside of himself, an asymptotic journey that subjects his starting positions and values as an observer, to the point of obliging him to question himself, his own culture, his own ideology, and the theoretical world from which he moves, to the point of operating a radical critique of the whole system prior to the here and now of the encounter and the session.

Inhabiting the relationship means recognizing that translation is impossible; that the path of analysis is as much an odyssey as a *nostos*, a journey far from the self in order to find the part of the self most suited to performing the analytical task; a *becoming native* that closely resembles a continuous *reusing* of the self, dense with misunderstandings, with the characteristics of an ambitious, adventurous, wasteful, sentimental quest. At the same time, while one seeks and exalts the *native* part of oneself in order to enact it in the relation, this does not exempt one from the risk of a self-referential tale of original purity that can become a device for confirming one's own hegemony and superiority, one's own narcissism. If trying to decentralize, in short, is a required necessity in the analytical relation, autonomizing is not up to the analyst. Therefore, the therapeutic relation also means a marvelous exotic journey and an exhausting exercise in renunciation, since having without giving and giving without having are mutually incompatible practices. An unspeakable, perhaps an unfathomable, incommunicability between different worlds. Remaining exposed is a matter of training, endurance, and also a propensity for dissipation and nothingness, more like a fistful of sand dissolving in the sea waves.

The scene of the analytic field is a conversation.  
The we-centered space is neither orderly nor fully lit

It is Robert Musil (1930) who, in *The Man Without Qualities*, writes: "In science everything is as strong, casual and splendid as in fairy tales" (p. 36). The scene of the analytic field resembles Levi-Strauss's initial photograph in the field: it is not orderly, nor is it fully illuminated by the analyst's reading ability. It is a thicket of circulating meanings in which the protagonists try to approximate. A paradigm based on circularity, which proposes to grasp the distinctions of the analytic field's own dynamics (Civitarese, 2023), takes the irreducible complexity of experience as a reference.

To know is to participate in a global unity of co-evolution based on structural mating relations in a network of networks from which the organization of the living system cannot be isolated without risking dissolution. Knowledge is, therefore, configured as an intrinsically participatory process. As Francisco Varela (1979) wrote: "The fundamental paradigm of our interaction with an autonomous system is a conversation".



That science exhausts experience is a die-hard old story. Radical reductionism, not the necessary methodological one, continues to be the imperishable dream since the time of Bacon, and perhaps much earlier. What drives it is the logic of ‘not yet’. What we have not yet drained of uncertainty and incompleteness, we will drain with our next move, our next discovery will take care of it. We are used to thinking that the gaze that science casts on reality comes from some kind of God’s eye. We ask science to tell us who we are, where we come from, and where we are going, and even think of the universe, forgetting our position within it. We still lack a theoretical revolution whereby science includes, rather than ignoring or attempting to remove, the lived experience of man as an indispensable part of our attempts to arrive at objective truth (Frank, 2024). We are also doing this with regard to a phenomenon such as consciousness or by wanting to standardize different forms of knowledge relating to the irreducible complexity of experience, as is the case when we want to reduce the phenomenology of relation and speech, constitutive of psychoanalysis, to the cause-effect determinism that should connect the brain to behaviour and experience. Science, far from being directed towards the search for absolute truth, is most likely a refined and constantly evolving form of human experience. Knowledge evolves, therefore, through the narrow doorway whose jambs are, on the one hand, the exercise of doubt and, on the other, the effort to keep the rising wave of the most trivial forms of scientific denialism at bay.

When posing an epistemological question, one encounters two perhaps unclearly formulated problems that might turn out to be non-problems. One is ‘the hard problem’, consciousness; the other is the relation between neuroscience and psychoanalysis. Both problems are probably unclearly formulated in the sense that the assumption in posing them is based on determinism and dualism, the implication, that is, that there are two ultimate substances, one physical and the other mental. An old story, infused moreover with Newtonian-style mechanicism and reductionism governed by the obsession with the search for the prime cause, which even first-order cybernetics has not yet solved.

Consciousness, understood as consciousness of self and the world (always partial and dynamic), is and remains a question. Instead of finally laying down centrality or self-centeredness in order to finally feel that we belong, we continue to look for the origins of consciousness as the origins of everything, without realizing that we are made to wonder where and what the origin is and, above all, what the cause of that origin is. By choosing a co-evolutionary epistemological orientation, we might realize that we become conscious of ourselves through our relation with others and the world. That the existence of any living entity is indefinable if we do not consider the relation in which it is constituted and co-evolves is evidence that is as clear as it is difficult to accept. So, too, is the tendency to turn all our interpretations and all our the-

ories concerning the phenomena of our experience into ontological substance. We are quite willing to place ourselves in the position of observers with respect to reality, but we usually overlook the evidence of being observed by reality: in that inescapable circular game, we emerge to ourselves by becoming conscious of being there, even if not entirely transparent to ourselves. Partly capable of conscious recognition, partly trapped in correspondence. And when we wonder how this happens, we need to turn to experience, starting with the body that we are and the body that we have. It was, in fact, some forty years ago, the epistemological turning point of complexity and the biological roots of knowledge that paved the way, with all the fatigue of paradigm shifts, to recognizing the relation between life and knowledge, and to laying the foundations for a non-deterministic and non-reductionist, *i.e.*, non-mortifying, view of the nature of living systems and the distinctions of human experience in particular. Does this mean that the paradigm shift has taken place and become consolidated? By no means! Cognitivism, reductionism, determinism, dualism, scientism on the one hand, and flights into the vagueness of esotericism, *new age* spin-offs, the spectacularization of compatible and politically correct scraps of trivialized aspects on TV talk shows on the other, play a prevalent role.

Knowing how we know should be the path to follow in order to acknowledge our knowledge of ourselves, of phenomena, and of our own experience. The only world we humans can build and have is the one we create together through the actions and relations of our coexistence. And this is not just another introduction to the biology of knowledge. According to second-order cybernetics, elaborated in particular by Heinz von Foerster, the process of knowing is not regarded as a representation of the 'world out there', but rather as a permanent production of the world – we might call it *worlding* – through the very process of life itself. The criticism is primarily concerned with cognitivism and the so-called Theory of Mind, according to which we come to know the other through the representation of his mental representation, and phenomena through their representation. The warning always applies: "*Don't bite my finger, look where I am pointing*" (attributed to McCulloch in: Seymour Papert, 1965. *Introduction to McCulloch*, p. 28, Cf. Wikiquote). Instead of finally turning our gaze to the body, to movement and its self-organization, which in the relation with others and the world allows knowledge to emerge through the very process of living, and the very consciousness of ourselves and the world, there is the tendency to hand ourselves over to an informational and cognitivist perspective in order to understand knowledge. Gaston Bachelard spoke of an epistemological obstacle; Enrique Pichon Rivi re of epistemophilic anxiety. The fact remains that following a paradigmatic revolution is destabilizing and, therefore, anxiety-provoking. So much so that the most relevant sense, in the concept of paradigm introduced by Thomas Kuhn, referred precisely to the function of a reassuring and retraining

obstacle that a certain paradigm shared in a scientific community plays in preventing innovation and the discontinuity of knowledge. The computational, informational, and cognitivist perspective in the conception of human knowledge is still here among us and, thanks to the so-called artificial intelligence, is experiencing a season of pervasive success.

When a scientific discovery is ahead of its time and appears as premature with respect to the dominant and canonical orientations, the obstacles to recognizing it are usually accentuated, as a study by Gunther Stent (1972) shows.

One dimension that is difficult to accept and embrace is the self-foundational one, for us humans who tend to constantly take up the search for a prime cause and end up finding it. Yet what distinguishes us and our lives is precisely knowledge as a permanent production of worlds through the very process of living. These are parallel worlds, as Vittorio Gallese defines them. By producing worlds, we produce ourselves. Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela argue: “Our proposal is that living beings are characterized by the fact that they continuously produce themselves, a process that we refer to as *autopoietic organization*”. In their accepted meaning, a very important issue, the organization of something is “that set of relations that must exist and must occur for this something to exist” (Maturana & Varela, 2024). Consciousness and psychoanalysis most likely exist in relations and not ‘out there, somewhere’. Beyond any linearity reducible to a cause-and-effect perspective, there emerges in all its relevance a vision based on the interesting idea of *gliding evolution*, of the evolution of systems that glide towards each other like pieces of ice and that never achieve a stable equilibrium because the interactive totality they constitute never manages to abolish the conflictuality and autonomy of its components. These perspectives converge in thoroughly investigating the idea of the *co-evolution* of systems and the *co-evolution* of what the observer defines as system and setting, rejecting the perspective of an absolute foundation of evolutionary and cognitive processes. On the basis of this view of the characteristics of living systems, the setting does not determine the structure, unity, and identity of the system considered, but it is the latter, on the contrary, that among the stimuli that come to it from the setting *selects* those that are admissible and those that are not, those that can be integrated into the cycles that define its organization and its identification as a living being, and those that cannot be integrated. This is an invitation to break the habit of falling into the temptation of linearity and certainty. Every cognitive experience, in fact, involves the one who knows in a personal way, rooted in his biological structure, so that every experience of certainty is an individual phenomenon heedless of the cognitive act of the other, in a solitude that is only overcome in the world that is created with it, in leaving ajar the relation that allows the emergence of what, recalling what Vittorio Gallese termed it, we have called the *we-centered space* (Gallese, 2003).

By closely examining how we come to know the world and every world

we know, we discover in what way our experience is inextricably linked to our body structure. We also encounter and often clash against the fact that we cannot separate the history of our actions, biological and social, from how a certain world appears to us. This is so obvious and close to us as to be the most difficult to see. If everything that is said is said by someone, and if every action is knowledge and every knowledge is action, we need to acknowledge that the phenomenon of knowledge cannot be conceived as if there were 'facts' or 'objects' external to us that 'one takes and puts in one's head'. The experience of something out there is validated in a particular way by the human structure that makes possible 'the thing' that emerges from the description.

Starting with Warren McCulloch's choice to develop, as one of the axes of the cybernetic movement, a perspective of empirical research capable of generating answers formulated in terms of plausible neurophysiological mechanisms, it has been acknowledged that the study of knowledge must be conducted not by compartmentalizing its processes but rather by reconstructing its complexity, *i.e.*, *understanding by building*. According to McCulloch's hypothesis, elaborated with mathematician Walter Pitts, a hypothesis that has produced the possibility of an epochal transition, all cognitive processes, from perception to learning, from reasoning to consciousness, are generated by streams of neuronal impulses moving along brain pathways of a reticular nature. The mind modelled in this way is not a substance but a process. Processual body materiality and reticularity of cognitive operations are not predetermined but must be generated through learning during interactions with others and the environment. Cognition thus takes on the characteristics of a creator of self-regulating meanings for perceived aspects of relational and environmental dynamics.

It was towards the end of the 1980s that the lines of cybernetic investigation that had refused to participate in the structuring of the computationalist approach came together to establish the new form of cognitive science. This new orientation was christened *embodied cognitive science* in order to emphasize the need to address the difficulties encountered by classical computationalism by re-evaluating the role of the biological body in cognitive processes. The key theoretical ambition is to overcome the mind/body dichotomy by orienting research towards a perspective of *radical embodiment*, an axis of investigation with a strong biological component, characterized by identifying the distinctive property of natural cognitive systems, as autonomous living systems, understood as the organisms' capacity to self-organize and react by self-regulation to environmental pressures. This is a theoretical approach that translates the inadmissibility of the digital computer model for describing natural cognitive systems. It is necessary here to recall how the notion of *embodiment* is combined, thanks to Francisco Varela's work, with the notion of *enaction* both in

recomposing the Cartesian dichotomy mind-body, and in focusing on the autopoietic matrix that allows for a broad integration of different levels and modes of description, for the characterization of cognitive processes. Thus, the relevance of a descriptive pluralism based on different ways of interpreting and studying the mind as a material process looms large, and the problem of unifying the domain around a single paradigm of investigation is addressed. In the pursuit of this goal, which aims to combine experimental epistemology and autopoietic biology, both the contributions of Maturana and McCulloch and the mediation of Heinz von Foerster and his line of enquiry known as 'second-order cybernetics', intervene. The theoretical core of von Foerster's model lies in a radical version of the thesis, affirming the continuity of life and cognition. Starting with a literal understanding of the Latin verb 'to compute', meaning 'to consider things together', von Foerster moves the concept of computation from the abstract epistemological space of *problem solving* to that of *learning* interpreted as biological adaptation, thus expressing a markedly biological reinterpretation of network modelling, in order to conceptualize the mind not as a substance but as a process. In von Foerster's modelling, the bodily dimension of the agent is not limited to offering organic support to the brain, understood as the only organ responsible for cognitive processes. The characterization of living systems as self-organizing networks implies that the body of the agent, as such, is a *cognitive body*; a system that, in its wholeness, perceives and reacts, creating meanings for its interactions. It is a theoretical angle in which all cognitive functions appear rooted in the deeper processes of the self-organizing body of the living system; an activity of self-organization inseparable from the active organization – the construction – of a signifying world of reference.

If one chooses this epistemological orientation, it becomes difficult to accept that the brain is a predictive machine that anticipates change and constructs reality by interpreting perceptual data on the basis of unconscious inferences to the best possible explanation based on the data in memory, and by testing predictions on sensory data; just as it seems unlikely to claim that consciousness arises from the detection of homeostatic imbalances and the adaptive response given by affective feelings, as Fissi seems to wonder in his contribution.

We can finally distinguish the constitutive properties of phenomena from the emergent properties of experience derived from those phenomena, properties of which the former are necessary but not sufficient conditions, not because we introduce mystery, but because the emergent properties concern relations and not the actual entities. This happens if one privileges second-order cybernetics to understand living systems: if one assumes the relation as the unit of analysis. In this way, artifices such as mental models, forms, and representations finally become futile and dissolve.

Through the relation, which is constitutive and is proposed as an embodied simulation, a structural pairing occurs that connects the inner states of active-perceptual systems with the external states in order to generate dynamic evolution and, at the same time, seek to preserve the structural and functional integrity of the system. Internal and external, circularly connected, become a unitary and inseparable phenomenology.

M. Solms brings us somewhat closer to this necessary epistemological orientation (2021):

“Asking oneself how objective things produce subjective things reflects inaccurate thinking, and risks making a difficult problem even more difficult than it already is. Objectivity and subjectivity are different observational perspectives, not cause and effect. Neurophysiological events do not produce psychological events just as lightning does not produce thunder: these phenomena are concomitant manifestations of a single underlying process.” (pp. 359-360)

Yet, once again, relation and experience are lacking as emergent and irreducible properties. Is there consciousness, in fact, *before* relation and experience? Are we faced with the unsolved problem of the connection between the physical and the phenomenal? Perhaps it is not ‘a difficult problem’, but rather the anxiety of the prime cause! Perhaps it becomes a non-existent problem, if we finally acknowledge that the relation precedes and founds all individuation.

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