

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE



# The paradox of the naturalisation of cognitive empathy

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### Abstract

The essay aims to show that the cancellation of the commonly shared division between basic empathy and cognitive or *mentalising* empathy is leading the debate to a paradox: explaining the latter starting from the first, thus annulling the differences.

Keywords: cognitive empathy, mentalizing, mindreading, mind

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In recent years we hear more and more often talks of “mindreading” or “reading of the mind” as if, becoming all wizards or sorcerers, we have the “inhuman” ability to initiate a reading of other people’s thoughts or volitions.

Certainly the evocative and captivating expression of mentalising offers to the imagination some reflective cues and creations of sophistication that can be well imagined, but a careful reflection, relieving us from the suggestions that the expression can provide, reveals the banner of a debate so much as intricate as it could never have been imagined.

When the expression “mind reading” is mentioned, immediately the more conscious reader refers his thoughts, his “mind”, to the cognitive problem of empathy; that is, that aspect of empathy which, by involving a cognitive effort on the part of the person concerned, would make the epistemically comprehensible that, at that moment, the observed feels, perceives or thinks.

In dealing with the concept of empathy, it is important to note that the *conditio sine qua non* in order to be recognised as “mind reading” the presence of an observer and a hypothetical victim who experiences

an empathic suffering should be met. As Hoffman[1] teaches us, cognitive empathy does not require a direct observation (therefore, of a co-presence of both actors), but of the cognitive effort of the observer, of the processing time and decoding of the message; it is no coincidence that the object of cognitive empathy is poetry, books or paintings.

For several decades, however, it has become common to speak of cognitive empathy even among humans and humans and non-humans[1]. It might be thought, in fact, that entering into the mind of the other derives from a mental capacity that has been developed in the course of human evolution; in fact, there is no lack of authors or participants in the debate who believe this is the key to solve the origin

<sup>1</sup>[1] Cfr. Martin Hoffman, *Empatia e sviluppo morale*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2008.

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of cognitive empathy, which, on the basis of Darwinian teaching, has manifested itself as a survival mechanism of the most suitable *to live in a social group*[2]. The problem in the problem, then, would become trying to explain from what it is generated or from what this ability depends and, above all, what nature has. It is in this sense that the discourse relating to cognitive empathy fully embraces the intent of naturalisation, not so much moral as it is mental: to explain the mind, the *cogito* through the neurobiological mechanisms that make up the brain. This is the intention of these last few years, which between transcendental transcendence and transcendence transcendental contributes to the flourishing of positions, themes and problems that are not easy to solve.

The sophistication of the mental debate has, by now, also affected the empathic process, cognitively understood, so much so that some philosophers (especially Americans) are making various proposals for its naturalization, starting a debate, in the opinion of the writer, paradoxical.

It is a problem that comes from afar, of which, however, the echo is still felt.

When Cartesio advanced the doubt *res cogitans* or *res extensa* in the seventeenth century, he proposed, probably without awareness, to posterity a dilemma that would have addressed and influenced much of the speculation that followed him; because speaking, today, in the twenty-first century of cognitive empathy is a result (I don't know how right or wrong) of that doubt, of that dilemma.

If it is true that in the last centuries there have been different and multiple positions on the problem of the mind that have advanced resolutions between metaphysics and physics, it is equally true that, having only provided the expression "naturalisation" of one's own denotate in recent years, it is then recognised since the early 2000s (symbolic date 2002 with the proposal by Adina Roskies of the expression "neuroethics"[1]) a naturalisation of the mental and, not by chance, just from those years the current problem of empathy reappeared to the great philosophical public.

And of this, Cartesio, if you allow me, was co-author / initiator.

In order to stem the metaphysical problem of the nature of the mind, over the last seventy years of the analytic philosophical tradition the use of the concept of *cognitive empathy / mindreading* has been exploited to explain the way in which a man, inserted in a group, is able to "understand" the other; entrusting this knowledge *sui generis* with a scientific, epistemic character, which led several philosophers to scientifically investigate this ability. In the contemporary, several proposals have been reached, including the one put forward by the American philosopher Peter Carruthers[2] who explains the cognitive empathy through the use of model of mental explanation from the name *Mindreading is prior*; this would be able to explain the intersubjectivity through the "form" of the reading of the mind, which, constituting a privileged access of the subject to his own cognition, would contribute to the explanation of what the other is thinking, trying or perceiving.

The model of the mental of Carruthers is based on the intent to use the concept of cognitive empathy as an instrument of explanation of the mental architecture able, in its turn, to explain the way in which this instrument works on the other, through subjective, personal access to one's mind. In this sense, *mindreading* becomes prior, since access to one's cognition would occur primarily through the "channel" of mind reading. Cognitive empathy.

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<sup>2</sup>I will not go into this second aspect, since the focus of the pages that will follow will be the problem of cognitive empathy only and exclusively to human beings. This choice is not dictated by racism or speciesism, but simply because it would interest me to understand how man possesses this ability *sui generis* to understand the other by himself.

<sup>3</sup>Cfr. ALISON GOPNIK E ANDREW N. MELTZOFF, *Words, Thoughts and Theories*, MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1997; ALAN M. LESLIE, *How to acquire a representational theory of mind*, in DAN SPERBER (A CURA DI), "Metarepresentations: A Multidisciplinary Perspective", Oxford university Press, Oxford, 2000, pp. 197-224; JUSTIN C. FISHER, *Does Simulation Theory Really Involve Simulation?*, in "Philosophical Psychology", 19(4), 2006, pp. 417-432.

If that of the American philosopher is just one of the many examples in literature today, the controversial issue, according to the writer, lies precisely in the approach that becomes paradoxical to the use of cognitive empathy.

In general, in the debate on the “tangle of empathy” two aspects of the phenomenon are usually distinguished: one so-called “basic or primary” and one secondary.

If with the first one is intended that cultural / neuroscientific ferment linked to the progressive and continuous discoveries of one or other areas of the brain able to contribute to the “empathy” phenomenon (the already discovered mirror neurons constitute the most famous example); with the second one there is a distinct cognitive approach to the phenomenon in which the “intellectual” effort of the observer towards the other is analysed, able to know epistemically the “mind” of others”. On this strand, as mentioned, the above example of the American philosopher and of the many like him who reflect on the role played by mindreading should be inserted.

The paradox lies precisely in this intent.

Assuming that the writer shares and fully embraces the naturalisation of the mental program, if the literature on empathy usually distinguishes two different approaches to the problem (neuroscientific, on the one hand; cognitive, on the other) and the actors participating in the debate share, in turn, “the rules of the game”, trying to explain mindreading through neuro-biological mechanisms means betraying differentiation. It means, though, to use the tools of basic empathy to explain an aspect of the same empathy that interests another field of interest (understanding epistemically the other), since, as a reminder, mindreading involves a cognitive effort on the part of the agent that is not present in the case of primary empathy. This means that the problem of

mentalising in the time of neuroscience is flattened out; for which:

- Or expect the latter to be able to tell us something about how the mind works, such as to explain, subsequently, the nature of cognitive empathy;
- Or all the speeches that will be made starting from the intent of naturalization of the mental and cognition before that moment will be vain and empty. Vani, because one would speculate on missing data; empty, because there are no data to think about.

This seems to me to be the state of the current debate on *mindreading*; which gives the impression that he has lost the red thread of Arianna: that is, he has forwarded himself into a labyrinth from which, from my point of view, there is no exit, not because of the complexity of the debate itself, but because of an error interpretative of the nature of cognitive empathy. It seems to me more like a transcendental *ploy* to explain intersubjectivity, rather than human ability. That is, we must continue to come to terms with Cartesian *res*.

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<sup>4</sup>Cfr. ADINA ROSKIES, *Neuroethics for the New Millennium*, in “Neuron”, Vol. 35 (1), 2002, pp. 21-23.

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