

Epistemic Trust.

Outline for a Phenomenology of Shared Intentionality

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ABSTRACT

Phenomenology is a method for thinking the (ontological) novelty of things, as irreducible to their (physical, biological, psychological) foundations. In this paper I shall exemplify this claim by addressing a question debated in contemporary philosophy of mind, analytical ontology, moral and natural philosophy, namely: what makes a human person out of a member of the biological species *homo sapiens*? A set of socially transmitted rules, a second cultural nature, seems to be a necessary condition for what we called primary self-constitution, the emergence of a “normally” behaving human subject. Epistemic trust is the basic condition for this transmission. The arguments for my claim are part of a general theory of acts, including voluntary actions, mental acts, speech acts and social acts, providing the foundation for a theory of personal identity and research in the field of social cognition.

Trust is a very intriguing subject for a phenomenologist. For phenomenology itself can be defined as a way of thinking based on the exercise of trust – albeit a peculiar kind of trust, that I’ll term *epistemic trust*.

1. EPISTEMIC TRUST AND THE CULTURE OF SUSPICION

Phenomenology has been here for a century, and yet very few people do really understand its novelty. Too many thinkers or just scholars have usurped its beautiful name, without sharing in the least its spirit, without applying or

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developing the methods for philosophical *research* on vital topics in our contemporary world, for which it had been devised.

What is, in fact, the spirit of phenomenology? I'll try to summarize it by this very notion of epistemic trust. I'll define epistemic trust as the systematic adoption of following key-principle: (ET) *Nothing appears in vain* (without a foundation in reality) – of course the reverse is not true: There is much more to discover in reality than what appears (otherwise no *research* would be needed, and we would be omniscient).

Epistemic trust is a style of thinking, which might be clarified through some more definite methodological principles. In this presentation I do not want to get into methodological details, though. The first thing I want to convey by this formula is that phenomenology has been so widely misunderstood, because we have not yet – not in the least – understood the whole depth of Plato's summons: *sozein ta fainomena*, to "save" phenomena. That is, things which are seen, things which appear, *fainomena* indeed.

Phenomenology so characterized seems to radically escape what the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur termed the "culture of suspicion". Under such a phrase I understand the mental attitude quite opposed to epistemic trust: a complete lack of confidence in the world of phenomena, that is in the ordinary world of our daily experience. This is both faithful and unfaithful to Ricoeur's own understanding of his phrase.

Faithful, on one hand. In his highly influential work, *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricoeur (1970) draws attention to three key intellectual figures of the twentieth century who, in their different ways, sought to unmask, demystify, and expose the real from the apparent; «Three masters, seemingly mutually exclusive, dominate the school of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud» (Ricoeur 1970, p. 32).

On the other hand, Ricoeur's analysis focuses on a supposed false consciousness haunting – according to the three masters – a particular kind of experience – namely, religious experience. Religion is not about what it seems to be about. According to Marx, while religion appeared to be concerned with the lofty issues of transcendence and personal salvation, in reality its true function was to provide a "flight from the reality of inhuman working conditions" and to make "the misery of life more endurable". Religion in this way served as "the opium of the people". Similarly, Nietzsche unmasks religion to reveal it as the refuge of the weak. Likewise with Freud, the same pattern of "unmasking" to reveal and distinguish "the real" from the "apparent" is

evident in his analysis of religion. So, while religion was perceived to be a legitimate source of comfort and hope when one is faced with the difficulties of life, in reality religion was an illusion that merely expressed one's wish for a father-God.

In this respect, my understanding of Ricoeur's dictum is slightly unfaithful to his own. For a false consciousness is no actual experience. Ricoeur himself insisted that it would be a mistake to view the three as masters of scepticism. They are involved with destroying established ideas, not with criticising authentic experience. Quoting Ricoeur himself:

All three clear the horizon for a more authentic word, for a new reign of Truth, not only by means of a 'destructive' critique, but by the invention of an art of interpreting. (Ricoeur 1970, p. 33)

All three, for Ricoeur, «represent three convergent procedures of demystification» (Ricoeur 1970, p. 34).

Once a false consciousness is demystified, authentic experience can take place again, and reality revealed, within the limits of an age's conceptual and cultural means. In this respect, the masters of suspicions are no masters of scepticism.

Now, independently of Ricoeur's purpose, I do believe that our age *is* an age of scepticism, thereby interpreting the school of suspicion in a much more radical way, namely as a school of complete lack of confidence in the truthfulness of experience itself.

1. SCEPTICISM AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Philosophy of nature as well as philosophy of culture has proposed many reasons to doubt that things are as they appear, over the last century. The "culture of suspicion" – in my radical interpretation – that is a majority of continental philosophers of the twentieth century, on the one side, and the mainstream naturalism striving toward an image of the world compatible with contemporary science on the other side, suggests that our experience (and our moral experience quite particularly) is a pervasive, systematic illusion. They could be right.

Why has this happened? The story would be too long to tell: we shall limit ourselves to pointing to the two mentioned contemporary forms of scepticism

concerning visible things – or the visible and sensible life-world: which we may term as Post-modern Relativism and Reductive Materialism.

The first one has been the dominant philosophy of culture, whereas the second one has been the dominant natural philosophy of man and his mind. Both represent a form of scepticism relative to the immediately given things of our life-world, including ourselves, human persons.

According to post-modernism no real epistemic credit can be given to immediate cognition or consciousness – no form of intuition, acquaintance, perception, feeling is a mode of veridical experience, the world being as it were wrapped up in language, culture, interpretations.

But according to reductive materialism, phenomena are epi-phenomena, just shadows or dreams caused by a completely different reality. Take for example Daniel Dennett's (1991), "the phenomenological garden": we do not find a description of a real scene like this one, or of a fictional one, similar enough to a human life-world of the Twentieth century on earth, but just a list of qualia, or sense data, in three classes:

1. "Experiences" of the outer world, such as views, sounds, smells, sensations of slippery or rough, of warm and cold, and of our body's position;
2. "Experiences" of the inner world, such as imaged views and sounds, memories, ideas and insights;
3. "Experiences" of emotions and feelings.

All that is purely "subjective", that is belonging to what contemporary philosophers of mind call "phenomenal consciousness", the "hard problem" of consciousness, i.e., phenomenal consciousness.

Actually, questioning the reliability of sensory and sensible experience has been a main trend in the history of modern philosophy, starting indeed from Descartes doubt, going on with Galileo and Locke's expulsion of secondary qualities from the furniture of the real world... Yet the "age of suspicion" induced by modern science on the world of everyday experience was at its beginnings in Descartes' days. Nowadays we can perfectly conceive of a world such as that of *Matrix*, where no experienced object is really as it appears: steaks are nothing but tasty *qualia* and people themselves are nothing but the characters of a (shared) dream, while their true life is lived somewhere else...

In fact, the “phenomenological garden” of Dennett, or the world of *Matrix*, is just a set of beautifully arranged qualia, which would support the universal negation of our Principle of epistemic trust:

(N) All appears in vain

(N) supports a version of (epi)*phenomenalism*. And phenomenalism is surely no phenomenology, but the very opposite way of thinking: a radical form of scepticism about phenomena.

Take any issue in contemporary philosophy of mind: the “hard problem” of consciousness, that is the nature of any form of direct cognition, such as perception, emotion, empathy, self-perception; or the nature of the self; or – most important for meta-ethics and legal philosophy – the issue of free will. All of them can be reduced to the general problem of epistemic trust, that is, of reliability of ordinary experience. This is particularly clear with free will.

There is no doubt that we experience free will as the power to determine ourselves to an action, usually in the presence of alternative possible actions; moreover, such an experience seems to be constitutive of our personal and moral identity. Through the decisions I make I assert my identity, stating who I am and projecting the one I shall be – on the background of what I have been. And this is not only true from a first person point of view. I learn to know other people from their actions, through the emotions, the sentiments that their voluntary actions arouse in me: gratitude, grudge, admiration, disdain – and the corresponding value judgments. All the realm of moral experience supposes that we do in fact enjoy free will.

2. CAN WE TAKE EXPERIENCE SERIOUSLY?

The question is whether this kind of experience is valid – even though its fallibility, as any other experience of reality – or whether it is systematically deceptive: whether it *can* be veridical or not, whether it *does* correspond to something beyond the experience itself, in reality. This is the general meaning of most philosophical questions today, and free will is just a privileged issue to focus on it.

Now, moral experience is just a part of value-experience (morally good or bad, and all of the virtues and vices, are, respectively, positive or negative values of voluntary actions, or habits). In order to take moral experience seriously, I first have to take value-experience seriously. Morality presupposes

that there are things of value, negative and positive; that there are things and states of affair which are valuable in some respect (pleasant or unpleasant, beautiful or ugly, precious or cheap, holy or unholy etc.), and even more or less valuable.

Moral goodness, in fact, can be defined as the property of a voluntary action (or behaviour, or habits, or intention) aiming at realizing the higher possible value in the given situation.

More specifically, the human world is full of wrongs, for example of killings, frauds, act of violence etc.; moreover, there are lots of things which seem unfair even when there is nobody acting unjustly (e.g., depending on economy or social relations), there are vulgar attitudes and ugly pictures etc.

Am I justified in taking all this experience seriously? That is, in considering experience, including moral and value experience, either as reliable or as at least correctible, in any case as such, that we can learn from it, use it as evidence for our judgements and inferences, etc.? Has our experience generally a cognitive value? And if perception does, why emotion should not?

Let's consider my indignation at a base act, like cheating a defenceless child. In order to take this experience seriously, I must believe: (1) that the agent acted freely, and that free will is no illusion; (2) that the action is actually base, a moral wrong, hence that there are negative or inferior values that the action realizes instead of positive or higher ones.

Hence in order to take my indignation seriously I must entertain a) an ontological b) an axiological belief.

Am I justified in having this kind of beliefs? The question is: can beliefs of this kind be true and justifiable, even if they were not justified in this particular case?

3. EPISTEMIC TRUST AND PERSONHOOD

The answer is yes, only in case (ET) is true. In fact, phenomenology is born to oppose scepticism concerning the phenomenal world, be it of a post-modern relativist, or of a reductive materialist kind.

Why should we adopt epistemic trust instead of scepticism, or phenomenology instead of phenomenalism?

I'll argue that epistemic trust is a necessary condition for human animals to become persons, that is, reasonable or responsible agents. The point of the

argument is that, if I am right, no human animal can become a subject of acts, or develop a selfhood, without entertaining a relation to reality which is a relation of epistemic adequacy – as opposed to simple biological adaptation. In other words, one does not become a normal, autonomous individual of the human kind without entertaining a relation with truth and falsity: a relation which is fundamental even before being voluntary, or conscious.

Let us begin by quoting a passage from a social phenomenologist, Peter L. Berger:

To become a parent is to take on the role of world-builder and world protector. The role that a parent takes on represents not only the order of this or that society, but order as such, the underlying order of the universe that it makes sense to trust. (Berger 1995, p. 55)

«Everything is in order, everything is all right» (p. 55) – that is the kind of sentence by which any parent reassures her children. This phrase, Berger says, can be expanded into an assertion of cosmic scope: “Be confident. Trust what there is”. He goes on:

This is precisely what the formula intrinsically implies. And if we are to believe the child psychology [...] this is an experience that is absolutely essential to the process of becoming a human person. Put differently, at the very centre of the process of becoming fully human at the core of *humanities*, we find an experience of trust in the order of reality. (Berger 1995, p. 55, 56)

We must be more analytic to understand the deep issue which is at stake in this passage. What is being “built” in the relation between a parent and a newborn child is what phenomenologists call the self-evidence of the life world, or, as Erwin Straus has it, the axiomatic of the everyday world: to sum up, the fundamentals of that shared tacit knowledge, mostly practical knowledge, know how or “sich bekennen”, being familiar with, that is *common sense*. Husserl introduces the concept of *transcendental trust*: i.e., the confident expectation that experience keeps going on in the same constitutive style, or according to the same constitutive rules (Formal and transcendental logic). The real world, Husserl underlines, «exists only on the assumption, constantly prescribed, that experience keeps going on in this same constitutive style» (Husserl 1929).¹ L. Binswanger quotes this passage from Husserl in order to emphasize the tragic loss of “natural evidence” (*natürliche Selbstverständlichkeit*) which can take

¹ Quoted by L. Binswanger (1960, p. 24; the translation is mine).

place in schizophrenia or major depression, when the patient experiences “the end of the world”. Actually this loss of transcendental trust is the loss of “normality” – the loss of reason and even personal identity, the very basis of severe psychopathologies.

John Searle calls “background” this largely shared set of tacit cognitions and abilities which are, according to him, no intentional states (beliefs or intentions), but allow intentional states to refer or to have conditions of satisfaction. This background contains the enormous number of implicit norms, or patterns of “normal” behaviour, that we follow when dressing up (order of suits, socks, shoes) or cutting a cake (one does not cut it like one cuts the grass), even if any explicit direction about how to act correctly is missing. But, as we learn how to behave more or less adequately by “doing with”, or taking part in common activities, sharing ordinary life, so we learn how to respond in appropriate ways to events in the environment by sharing experiences, “right” ways of perceiving and feeling.

As flourishing researches in social ontology and social cognition have shown, we – the “neotenic” animals, the ones whose training to autonomous life is the longest one – learn by shared intentionality the right ways to be and act in the world. How do we achieve this apprenticeship of reality?

The key-notion of this account is a concept playing a very basic role in Husserl’s phenomenology, namely that of Position (*Stellungnahme*). What follows can also be read as a commentary of a very deep dictum by Husserl, describing the very nature of personal life: “*Alles Leben ist Stellungnahme*”.

Mental life is usually described as a sequence of mental states. This description, current in contemporary philosophy of mind, is unfaithful to *mental life of a person*. Personal life is no sheer sequence of mental states (such as a dream) but rather a motivational connection of acts. Let me quote two passages by Husserl, where he points out the relation between *positionality* and *normativity* – or, as I would say, “normality” of our mental life:

Alles Leben ist Stellungnehmen, alles Stellungnehmen steht unter einem Sollen, einer Rechtssprechung über Gültigkeit oder Ungültigkeit, nach prätendierten Normen von absoluter Geltung. Solange diese Normen unangefochten, durch keine Skepsis bedroht und verspottet waren, gab es nur eine Lebensfrage, wie ihnen praktisch am besten zu genügen sei. Wie aber jetzt, wo alle und jede Normen bestritten oder empirisch verfälscht und ihrer idealen Geltung beraubt werden? (Husserl 1987)

In order to understand this passage better, we must recall that central achievement of Husserl's which is his *unified theory of reason* (theoretic, axiological, practical), as the realm of acts subject to normativity, or the distinction right/wrong. Here is a passage nicely summarizing that achievement:

Der Deutlichkeit halber bemerke ich, dass das Wort Vernunft hier nicht im Sinne eines menschlichen Seelenvermögens, sondern einen Titel für die wesensmässig geschlossene Klasse von Akten und ihre zugehörigen Aktkorrelaten befasst, die unter Ideen der Rechtmässigkeit und Unrechtmässigkeit, korrelativ der Wahrheit und Falschheit, des Bestehens und Nichtbestehens usw. stehen. Soviel Grundarten von Akten wir scheiden können, für welche dies gilt, soviel Grundarten der Vernunft. (Husserl 1988)

This way, the whole set of "*intentionalen Erlebnisse*" – that is "*Akte*", partitioned into the three classes of cognitive or "doxic", axiologic or "*wertende*", practical or conative "Erlebnisse" are described as subject to normativity. The life of reason starts with the life of a person, permeates all her experiences, perceptions, feelings, intentions, desires, decisions... A very "aristotelian" picture indeed, very far from Cartesian and post-Cartesian dualism of mind and body, reasons and passions etc.

Normativity is an essential feature of intentionality, though a very neglected one both in continental and analytic philosophy of mind: yet it pervades the whole extent of our mental life. This is a deep insight phenomenology offers, suggesting that we should look at personhood as the condition of what we may call "the normative animal". A description of what we mean by "normative animal" can be found in this remarkable passage by Edmund Husserl:

Das Tier lebt unter bloßen Instinkten, der Mensch auch unter Normen. Durch alle Arten «von» Bewußtseinsakten geht ein damit verflochtenes normatives Bewußtsein von richtig und unrichtig (schicklich, unschicklich, schön, häßlich, zweckmäßig, unzweckmäßig usw.) und motiviert ein entsprechendes erkennendes, wertendes, dinglich und gesellschaftlich wirkendes Handeln. (Husserl 1989)

Consciousness and normativity are essentially bound in our life. Now, how is this possible, from its very beginning? For, according to this description, we do not first perceive, feel or act and only later learn to perceive, feel or act adequately; we are subject to normativity from the very beginning. We experience the world in such a way as to be at least able to learn from our

errors, to correct them. We are bound to be reasonable from the very outset of our life. How is *that* possible?

Husserl's answer to this question sheds light on many peculiarities which distinguish our very early dispositions to social cognition from those of other primates, as described in the pioneering work of Michael Tomasello (1999, 2008 and 2009).

We won't go into details here, but shall only point out to the essential insight Husserl allows us to work out, by linking, as he does, normativity to positionality, this other pervasive and largely neglected feature of intentionality. The upshot of this move is realizing that the exercise of reason is impossible without that of freedom – a pretty radical and yet non-arbitrary kind of freedom, largely unknown in the other animal species on earth. This non-arbitrary kind of freedom is the very basis of personhood, *in the sense that it is constitutive of it*. Hence, there is no exercise of reason without that of personhood. Personhood is no sheer biological condition, neither is it a sheer social status, conferred to us as that of belonging to a community, as being acknowledged as a member in other primates' communities. *Personhood is the more or less adequate exercise of positionality*. It is a biologically grounded disposition which actualizes itself in the progress of adequate position-taking in response to the environment. It is the work of the subjective side of intentionality. Yet this adequacy (right or wrong) cannot be there before we ourselves are there. And “we” are quite apparently not yet there at the very beginning. At the very beginning, our positionality is random, our *Stellungnehmen* is largely arbitrary. There is a “freedom” which precedes us, so to speak. If this “freedom”, or rather arbitrary positionality, is not adequately “guided”, we won't develop a “normal” personal life, a life of “reason”.

Teaching to take position adequately is the task of the original life-community which welcomes us at our birth, or one fundamental task of parental care – so obvious, that it often goes unnoticed. Only on the basis of a “correct” or truthful relation to factual and axiological reality of the environment can we develop the motivational coherence making up a self or a subject of further experience and action. But what is adequacy or correctness for a baby or a very young child?

Right and wrong – this is the law and ethos of the life community, most originally of the parental care-takers. This is what Berger meant by saying that parents “bring order into the world”:

A child wakes up in the night, perhaps from a bad dream, and finds himself surrounded by darkness, alone, beset by nameless threats. At such a moment the contours of trusted reality are blurred or invisible, and in the terror of incipient chaos the child cries out for his mother. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that, at this moment, the mother has been invoked as a high priestess of a protective order. It is she (and in many cases she alone) who has the power to banish the chaos and to restore the benign shape of the world. (Berger 1970, p. 54)

Mother is right in all she does to assert that there is no danger, that “all is in order”. But how can the infant know she is right? Well, this is epistemic trust, the more fundamental and necessary kind of trust. The necessary condition, not only to grow adult, and to verify whether that trust was just or not (maybe nobody of us mortal beings can really verify the absolute truth of that assertion – we only learn to know its relative truth). Epistemic trust is a necessary condition to become a “normal animal”, a human person.

4. SOME DETAILS

The basis of our entire personal life is given by what we may call *basic acts*, involving *first level positions*.

4.1. FIRST LEVEL POSITIONALITY

There are two classes of such basic acts: cognitive or emotional, perceptions and emotions. Cognitive basic acts, perceptions are characterized by first level “doxic” positionality; emotional basic acts by “axiologic” positionality.

What we call doxic positionality is realizing, taking note of the perceived thing’s existence. It is a kind of assent or denial, not a reflexive but an immediate one: yes, the thing is there. A perception *can* turn out to be a delusion. It could *not*, if there were no doxic position, like in an act of imagination or day-dreaming. A doxic position corresponds to the pretense of veridicality which distinguishes perceptions.

What we call axiologic positionality – is realizing the positive or negative salience, or value, of the given thing or situation. Each emotion includes such a position. In fact, emotions can be appropriate, or not. But they could not turn out to be non appropriate – such as panic in front of a very peaceful little cat – if they lacked any axiological position.

First level positions *are not free*. I cannot avoid endorsing the existence of what I see or touch; I cannot take up an opposite position on the negative value of an object of fear, or horror. Even in case the thing turns out to be a delusion as experience goes on, or the fearful beast not to be that bad after all.

What is the role of positionality in basic experience? It should be clear by now. Only positionality is responsible for *adequacy* of perceptions and emotions. Perceptions are veridical or not ; emotions are appropriate or not, *in virtue of their positions*. Hence, if by “experience” we don’t mean just causal impact of external reality on an organism, but *something we can learn from*, something which is or is not veridical, something which can provide evidence for our judgments, then we must take positionality into account.

To sum up: (basic) acts are *adequate or inadequate* responses to reality. By adequacy, I mean rational adequacy, in a broad sense: cognitive and practical. Personal life as a life of reason starts with the basic acts. Or, we can also say: basic acts constitute a first level of emergence of a person on her states: the level of evidential objectivation.

4.2. THE ROLE OF EPISTEMIC TRUST

Now, let’s observe a child or a newborn. Consider her basic experiences, emotions and perceptions. In every perception there is something like a yes or a no, an existential proto-judgement. Mother is there – or she isn’t. In every emotion there is something like an axiological yes or no. Good and evil, well-being, tummy-ache. Way before being able to voluntary or reflexively position taking, we spontaneously respond to the data of the environment – factual data and/or data of value – that are conveyed by perceptions and emotions. We respond with a sort of cognitive and emotive yes and no.

Initially, though, these positions are largely chaotic: clear in the limiting cases of crying and satisfaction, easy to turn into their opposites, they seem to follow each other as simple states, without a punctual “correspondence” with reality, and without an internal “coherence”. The care-giver brings order in the baby’s world by reinforcing all (and only) the adequate positions, and the same does the community within which the baby grows up. “Nasty table, it hurts you”, says mother while beating the edge of the table, “yees so good!” – by feeding her child.

Indeed, a child *learns* to take a position – to take a position *correctly*, at the level of basic positions. They are not “free” (for one cannot choose whether or not approving of well-being or crying with tummy-ache) but can be so

inadequate, random and chaotic, that they would prevent the configuration of a unitary subject, with a motivational coherence, memories, and expectations. In order to constitute (truthful) experience, and hence the ground of our life, the pulsation of positional yes and no should not be totally dependent on emotional states, drives and desires. But how do we teach our children right and wrong? We take the right positions *with* them, we share positionality. Only in this way an ordered world, more or less objective and filled with positive and negative qualities, emerges from a flux of sensory, emotional, enactive experience.

We can verify it every day, even observing young humans far beyond the age of what we may call primary self-constitution, or the apprenticeship of the basic skills of personhood, within the customs and language of the concerned life-community. Without a discipline of consents and prohibitions, of positive and negative endorsements on the part of the concerned life-community, no new member of it ever becomes a “normal” subject, a person finally capable of responsibility and reason. A person only grows up on the basis of the right and wrong responses that we learn to give in our infancy – and far beyond. For we humans never stop growing up: “ripeness is all”, but it is seldom reached.

A set of socially transmitted rules, a second cultural nature, seems to be a necessary condition for what we called primary self-constitution, the emergence of a “normally” behaving human subject. Epistemic trust is the basic condition for this transmission, and this would conclude the argument.

4.3. FREE ACTS

It would not end the phenomenology of our growing up, though. Personhood involves individual personality. We have so long examined the role of positionality in making up the solid ground of a life capable to learn from experience, indefinitely, and to save acquired knowledge for future generations (as other primates don't do, or very little). Is this its only role?

Of course not, if primary self-constitution is not human or personal ripeness. Personhood is a highly individuated “normal” behaviour. Within the range of normality, there is no function (perception, cognition, memory, emotional life, language) whose exercise would not appear, in our species, highly “personalized”. How do individual personalities emerge? Here is a further job for positionality within our intentional life (in the broad sense of “intentional”).

Basic positions are not free – it is not in our power to see something that isn't there or to feel as good something that hurts us. But we *can* switch attention from the factual datum, as we can “neutralize” the negative emotional datum, instead of “taking them over” and let us be “motivated” by them to further exploration, further emotions or actions, even in the passive sense of agreeing to an incitement to further experience.

These “removals” and “acceptances” are second order positions. Second order positions generally *are* in our power: they are free acts – in a broad sense of “free”, which does not necessarily involve reflective consciousness, let alone deliberation. They are responsible for those spontaneous and largely unreflective (in a sense, “unconscious”) strategies of avoidance and pursuit through which everyone track his life in the world, thereby manifesting personal motivational patterns, a “character” or a “personality”. Some of us, still in a cradle, pay more attention to colours, other to sounds. This spontaneous and unconscious *management of our passivity*, so to speak, or of our exposure to the experience, manifests a kind of “freedom” – or individualization of behaviour – largely unknown among other primates. The exercise of it is what makes us different from each other. If positionality of the first order, or adequate positionality, constitutes us as reasonable (“normative”) animals, positionality of the second order, or free positionality, constitutes us as individual persons. In a sense, this “freedom” precedes and shapes us, as our actions and activities do all over our life.

The object of these second order positions is nothing well defined and structured as a project, not even a meaningful voluntary action like that of comforting a friend or preparing a coffee. They define what we can describe as the *grey zone of spontaneity*. And this grey zone where the human behaviour has a limited responsibility is surprisingly vast. It not only covers early infancy behaviours, it is not only typical for collective behaviours with their sometimes inhuman consequences (the “big animal”, said Plato), but it is also the *basso continuo* of our conscious life, the ensemble of its routines, the ground of our “familiarity” with the world and with the others.

It is surprising how much of ourselves, of our individual selves, is “built” in this grey zone of spontaneity, which harbours a part of the enigma characterizing human personality, for better and for worse. Indeed, by exposing and not exposing myself to a certain path of further experience, emotions, actions, I determine “myself”, emerging from the states I happen to live in (while other primates just keep living in them) and I orient my life

instead of just living through it. In a certain measure, I make myself responsible for what I become.

4.4. A CONCLUSION ON WILL AND FREE WILL

Positions of this order are in broad sense free acts, but they lack of a *conscious intention* – of a *purpose*. Free will – the conscious exercise of a *power to endorse or not* any given motif of action – desires, drives, aspirations, emotions, interests, engagements, duties – is not yet involved here. Free will, or rather decisions and choices actualizing it – represent a positionality of a further level, by which a possible reason for action is transformed in an actual, causally efficacious one. In fact, what else is “the will” if not *positionality or power of endorsement at this level of cognitive, axiological and practical acts, or “reason”*? It could definitely not exist without the interplay of “normality” and “spontaneity” at the inferior levels, without non-free and free positionality. But once the inferior levels are granted, why should free will not be as real as it seems to be?

Why then does the problem of free will seem so insoluble? Our analysis shows that this depends on a sort of *fallacy in the order of explanation* of the relevant phenomena. Most philosophers presuppose our existence as human persons (without saying in what it is characteristic), and wonder whether our “will” (without explaining what they mean by this word) is “free” (sometimes without really defining this predicate). They don’t observe, instead, the two described features of our being:

1. A truthful or at any rate correctible relation to factual and value data of experience, a “normality” of responses
2. A surprising discretionary power through which any human being lets himself get motivated by those data, thereby manifesting what we call her “character”.

These features seem to be constitutive conditions of personhood, required for “reason” and “will” to be there too. Only on their basis will decisions and choices become possible, as soon as feasible and meaningful actions can be represented as projects and turned into effective actions by decisions. As self-obligations, decisions and choices are self-constitutive acts at a higher level, in which identity through time is constituted and modified: since any such project involves taking over responsibility for one’s future self and recognizing oneself

responsible for past actions. Any decision involves a conscious endorsement or reject of what we are already. A decision involves a first person reflective attitude, something far beyond the spontaneous management of one's passive states. Much more basically than in the exercise of free will, phenomenology opens up the interplay of chance, norms, freedom and truthfulness through which we build ourselves as the persons we shall be, by trial and error.

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