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Observation, interaction, communication:

The role of the second person

Recent years have seen an upsurge of interest in the second-person perspective, not only in philosophy of mind, language, law, and ethics, but also in various empirical disciplines such as cognitive neuroscience and developmental psychology. A distinctive and perhaps also slightly puzzling feature of this ongoing discussion is that whereas many contributors insist that a proper consideration of the second-person perspective will impact our understanding of social cognition, joint action, communication, self-consciousness, morality, etc. there remains considerable disagreement about what exactly a second-person perspective amounts to (see Eilan 2014; Conant & Rödl 2014). What is the difference between adopting a second-person and a third-person perspective on another? How does one relate to another as a you and how does that differ from relating to another as a he, she, or they? In the following, I will consider three different proposals and argue that a promising but somewhat overlooked account can be found in the work of Husserl.

1. Social perception

On a widespread view, our knowledge of other minds is based on an inference to best explanation. Other people's mental states are "inherently unobservable constructs" (Mitchell 2008) that we posit in order to explain and predict their behaviour in roughly the same way as physicists appeal to electrons and quarks in order to predict and explain observable phenomena (Saxe et al. 2004: 87). Strictly speaking, I cannot see the other's sadness, but only drops of liquid rolling from the eyes, contortions of the facial muscles, and broken sounds. If it seems to me that I see more than that, this is due to the pervasive, but surreptitious, influence of a theory of mind (Gopnik et al. 2001: 6, 47, 57, 155, Lavelle 2012: 228).

As influential as this view has been (and continues to be), it has also come under pressure in recent years. Appealing to notions such as social perception or person perception, a number of philosophers have argued that we can in fact see the other's elation or doubt in his or her face, hear the other's trepidation, impatience, or bewilderment in her voice, feel the other's enthusiasm in his handshake, grasp his mood in his posture, and see her determination and persistence in her actions (Green 2007, Gallagher 2008, Krueger & Overgaard 2012, Zahavi 2011, 2014, McNeill 2019, Neufeld 2020).

The idea that an observation of bodily expressions and expressive behaviour might directly inform us about the other's mind doesn't merely align with common sense, but is also a view with philosophical precedents. Central figures in phenomenology have long taken an embodied approach to the question of interpersonal understanding and have argued that the real challenge isn't about bridging the gap between visible but mindless behaviour and invisible but disembodied mentality, but to understand the link between early forms of perceptually grounded interpersonal understanding and more sophisticated and intellectually demanding forms of social cognition.

Max Scheler was an influential defender of such a view. In *The Nature of Sympathy* (from 1923), he explicitly labelled his own theory "a perceptual theory of other minds" (2008: 220), and in what must count as a *locus classicus*, he wrote:

For we certainly believe ourselves to be directly acquainted with another person's joy in his laughter, with his sorrow and pain in his tears, with his shame in his blushing, with his entreaty in his outstretched hands, with his love in his look of affection, with his rage in the gnashing of his teeth, with his threats in the clenching of his fist, and with the tenor of his thoughts in the sound of his words. If anyone tells me that this is not 'perception', for it cannot be so, in view of the fact that a perception is simply a 'complex of physical sensations', and that there is certainly no sensation of another person's mind nor any stimulus from such a source, I would beg him to turn aside from such questionable theories and address himself to the phenomenological facts (2008: 260).

The views espoused by Scheler and other more recent perceptualists have, of course, not remained uncontested. Whereas some critics have argued that these types of accounts are committed to an unpalatable type of behaviourism (Jacob 2011), others have insisted that expressive understanding is not perceptual (Gomes 2019), just as there are those who claim

that the perceptual accounts are compatible with and absorbable by standard inferentialist models (Lavelle 2012). In the following, my focus will be on none of these challenges. Rather, I will take my point of departure in an early, but influential, assessment of Scheler's theory. In *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer pointed to Scheler's exploration of the expressive dimension as one of his decisive achievements (Cassirer 1957: 85). And as Cassirer then continued, were we to ignore the role of expressivity, "all access to the world of inner experience would be closed to us – the bridge which alone can lead us into the realm of the 'thou' would be cut" (Cassirer 1957: 87).

Cassirer's reference to the *thou* mirrors remarks found in Scheler's own work. One of the chapters in the final part of *The Nature of Sympathy* is precisely entitled "The general evidence for the 'thou'". If we grant that social cognition can take different forms, one way to cash out the difference between a second-personal and a third-personal form of social cognition would be by pointing to the difference between recognizing that someone is in pain by seeing and hearing him wince and moan and inferring that someone is in pain by realizing that he has just removed a bottle of painkillers from the medicine cabinet. But is this proposal satisfactory and does the focus on the observation of the other's facial expression, gestures, bodily postures etc. really get to the heart of what it means to relate to the other as a you?¹ Here is one initial worry: A person might be having a nightmare and moan involuntarily in his sleep. If you were observing him while this happened and if you saw his distress, would you then be relating to him second-personally, or would you merely be engaged in third-personal observation?

2. *Openness and interaction*

The idea that research on social cognition ought to assign a central prominence to the second person has become so widespread in recent years that there has even been talk of a "You turn" (Eilan 2014). In an influential paper entitled "Toward a second-person neuroscience" Schilbach and colleagues criticized standard accounts for approaching the topic of social cognition without considering the importance of emotional engagement and social interaction. Such accounts target the other as a he or she, rather than as a you, and can be termed "spectator theories of other minds" (2013: 394) in the sense that they construe social cognition as if it primarily happened through "a one-way mirror, where a detached observer reads out the mental

¹ In the following, I will stick to the standard English second-person pronoun and use 'you' rather than 'thou' unless quoting from a text that explicitly uses the latter term.

states of another person, who, in turn, is not affected by this and cannot react to it” (Schilbach et al. 2013: 396). Such considerations put pressure on the idea that mere observation will allow one to relate to the other as a you, but still leaves it open what exactly a second-personal relation is.

If one turns to Buber’s formative writings on the dialogical principle, in particular his classical *I and Thou*, for further inspiration and clarification, it is noteworthy, and perhaps also somewhat surprising, that Buber explicitly claims that the I-you relationship isn’t restricted to the human sphere, but that it also is possible to have an I-you relation to things of nature, including trees (Buber 1970: 56-58, 172-173). What Buber primarily seems to have in mind in this latter case, is an immediate and holistic encounter with the thing that appreciates its uniqueness and irreducible otherness, and which isn’t driven by an instrumental agenda, but on the contrary remains open to and respectful of what the thing has to offer (Buber 1970: 58, 62). This characterization of the second-person relation has more recently been adopted by Reddy (one of the co-authors of the Schilbach paper). For Reddy, the key difference between a second-personal and a third-personal relation is that the former is characterized by a particular kind of personal engagement and openness (Reddy 2008: 28). If you interact with another in a manner that involves stereotypes or a pre-set agenda, you are not facing the other with the required openness, and the relation is not second-personal. By contrast, you might watch a movie and feel addressed by the actor and respond emotionally, and thereby relate to the other in a manner that is open and second personal (Reddy 2018: 437). In a recent paper, Brinck and Reddy have even argued that it is possible to engage with inanimate objects in a second-personal dialogical manner (Reddy 2018: 437, Brinck and Reddy 2020). An example that they discuss in some detail concerns the way a potter can approach the clay she is working with. Brinck and Reddy obviously acknowledge that the clay is not a sentient being, and that it cannot literally address or attend to the potter, but on their view, this doesn’t prevent the potter from having a second-personal relation to the clay, i.e., from standing in an I-you relation to it (2020: 41-42). As they argue, “the participants’ cognitive and mental capacities are irrelevant for establishing the nature of the interaction” (2020: 40).

It is important to recognize that our engagement with objects can take different forms and that not all of them are instrumental or exploitative. The way one engages with a lawn that has to be mowed is quite likely different from the way a potter engages with clay or a sculptor engages with marble. But to suggest that the latter form of engagement should amount to a second-personal relation and to speak interchangeably of an inanimate object and a sentient co-subject as a you is a mistake. The relation to the clay is not a social relation, is not an interaction

with another social being. And whatever resistance and response the clay might offer to the efforts of the potter, it is not on a par with or comparable to the response a co-subject can provide.

Let me propose that a general problem with the recent focus on openness, emotional engagement and bodily interaction is its insufficient emphasis on the importance of *reciprocity* and that a more promising approach is to think of second-personal relations as involving mutual address and a particular kind of communicative connectedness. Suggestions along these lines can be found in the work of a contemporary of Scheler, namely, Husserl.

3. *Unidirectional and reciprocal empathy*

Empathy was a theme of central importance to Husserl. Importantly, Husserl didn't view empathy as a form of imaginative perspective taking or affective sharing (imagining what it must be like to be in the other's shoes or feeling what the other is feeling) (Zahavi 2014, 2017a). On the contrary, Husserl often used the term 'empathy' (*Einfühlung*) interchangeably with terms such as 'other-experience' (*Fremderfahrung*) or 'other-perception' (*Fremdwahrnehmung*). These terms already strongly suggest that Husserl's analysis of empathy makes him closer to the social perception camp than to the inferentialists.² As he writes in *Ideas II*:

Empathy is not a mediate experience in the sense that the other would be experienced as a psychophysical annex to his corporeal body but is instead an immediate experience of the other (Husserl 1989: 384–5, translation modified).

Along similar lines, Husserl speaks of how the other is given in his being-for-me (*Für-mich-sein*) in empathy, and how that counts as a form of perception (Husserl 1973c: 641). Indeed, when speaking of how we encounter the subjectivity of another, Husserl writes that

It would be countersensical to say that it [the other's subjectivity] is inferred and not experienced when given in this original form of empathic presentation. For every

² Ultimately, Husserl thinks that empathy is both like and unlike perception. It is like perception in being direct, unmediated, and non-inferential. It is unlike perception in not offering us the fullest presence of the empathized experience—that presence is only available to the subject of that experience (Husserl 1989: 208). For a further analysis, see Zahavi 2014: 123–141.

hypothesis concerning another subject already presupposes the ‘perception’ of this subject as other, and empathy is precisely this perception (Husserl 1973b: 352).

In a central text from 1932 entitled ‘Phenomenology of the communicative community’, Husserl complexifies his analysis by arguing that one must distinguish different types of empathy (1973c: 471). The simplest type is *unidirectional empathy*. I observe somebody and empathically grasp that he is distressed, sad, or happy, and I do so without the person ever realizing that I am attending to him. This case must be distinguished from a variety of cases that all in different ways actively involve the other. Consider first a case of *simultaneous* (or *parallel*) *empathy*, where I observe another, while she observes me. This would not yet amount to a case of reciprocal empathy, however, since each of us could simultaneously be directed at the other without either of us being aware of the other’s attention. Husserl mentions the case of two persons at a party who surreptitiously observe each other without ever realizing the other’s attention. Such a case must furthermore be distinguished from the following situation:

A special and very important case of the empathic experience, in which another is given to me as one who in turn is directed at a second person, consists in the case where I myself am co-experienced as this second person and where this indirect empathic experience coincides with my self-experience; that is, I experience my counterpart as being directed at myself (Husserl 2019: 338, translation modified).

Such a case of *reflexive empathy*, where A observes B and realizes that B is attending to A (while B continues to remain unaware of A’s realization), has again to be distinguished from *reciprocal empathy*. In this latter case, both subjects are aware of being attended to by the other. Husserl occasionally talks of how this form of empathy involves mutual awareness and brings the subjects into “contact” (*Berührung*) with each other (Husserl 1973b: 166-167; 1989: 385). A paradigmatic example of this type of empathy can be found in the face-to-face encounter. Here is what Husserl writes in a text from 1922:

What does an I-you determination look like? Not every intention and action directed by one I towards another is an I-you determination. Not every imagining and thinking directed from I to another I is an I-you-awareness.

I can see another bodily, thereby see his eyes, and yet not ‘look him in the eyes’.
I can see the other bodily and in the expression of his corporeality comprehend a part

of his inner life; I can be directed towards him and his acts, and yet not be with him and in him [...] in the special <sense> that ‘looking into the eyes’ of the other and turning ‘towards him’ implies. [...]

In an act in which one I addresses the other, the following must be in place: I₁ empathically grasps I₂, and I₂ empathically grasps I₁, but not only that: I₁ experiences (understands) I₂ as experientially understanding I₁, and vice versa. I see the other as seeing and understanding me, and it is further in this that I ‘know’ that the other in turn also knows himself as seen by me. We understand each other and are spiritually together in mutual understanding, in contact (Husserl 1973b: 211).

Two subjects standing in a relation of reciprocal empathy are no longer simply characterized by a being-next-to-each-other (*Nebeneinandersein*) but by a being-for-one-another (*Füreinander-dasein*) (Husserl 1973c: 471). In a later text from 1931, however, Husserl returns to the topic of reciprocal empathy and now insists that reciprocal empathy can occur without mutual address, and that it is the latter that is crucial for establishing an “I-you nexus”.

What now that reciprocal, active empathy is established? Thereby no social unity, no communicative [unity], no actual I-you nexus is established [...]. What is still missing is the intention (*Vorhabe*) and will of manifestation (*Kundgebung*) – the specific act of communication, which, in establishing a community, is called *communicatio* in Latin (Husserl 1973c: 472-473).

For Husserl, two persons who concurrently attend to each other and who are aware that they are being attended to by the other do not yet stand in an I-you relation. The latter is more demanding than reciprocal empathy, requires more than simply reciprocal perceptual contact. What is also needed is mutual address and communicative engagement.³ Metaphorically speaking, whereas reciprocal empathy allows two subjects to be “for-one-another”, this does not yet amount to an I-you relation, since the latter ultimately requires the subjects to be intentionally “within-each-other” (*Ineinander*) (Husserl 1973c: 477). In short, the reason why

³ Although Husserl does admit the possibility of non-verbal communication, for instance, pointing (1973b: 167), his wavering on the question of whether reciprocal empathy amounts to an I-you relation might ultimately be due to him underestimating how communicative a shared look can be. To put it differently, although one might envisage a situation of reciprocal empathy where A and B are in perceptual contact, without in any way reacting or responding to each other, such a situation of, say, simply staring into each other’s eyes is a limit case. Under normally circumstances, face-to-face encounters involve bidirectional responsiveness and would consequently qualify as I-you relations. For an informative discussion of different types of looks – including orientating looks, checking looks and sharing looks –, see Hobson and Hobson 2011.

observing a sleeping person in the grip of a night terror doesn't amount to relating to that person as a you, isn't simply because the attention remains unnoticed, but also because the lack of mutual address prevents the right kind of intentional intertwinement and reciprocity from being established.

4. *Social acts*

To get a better comprehension of Husserl's underlying idea, let us take a closer look at his claim that communicative acts are *social acts* (Husserl 1989: 204). Although occurring quite frequently in Husserl's writings, the notion of social act is more commonly associated with the work of Reinach, in particular his 1913 monograph *Die apriorischen Grundlagen des bürgerlichen Rechts*.

Whereas some intentional acts – say acts of imagining or deciding – for Reinach are internal acts that can be performed without being expressed or announced, there are other intentional acts, such as commanding or requesting, that cannot entirely be performed from within (2012: 18). Acts of commanding or requesting are not merely other-directed (*fremdpersonal*), they also address and thereby seek to infiltrate the intentional life of another subject (2012: 18-19). As Reinach elaborates, acts such as commanding, requesting, warning, questioning, answering, informing cannot be successfully executed by one party only; rather, they are “in need of uptake” (*vernehmungsbedürftig*) by their addressee (2012: 19). If this condition is not met, then such *social acts* will fail to fulfil their purpose, they will be “like thrown spears which fall to the ground without hitting their target” (2012: 19).

Given their need for uptake, all social acts must be expressed and made public:

a social act, as it is performed between human beings, is not divided into an independent act and a statement about it which might or might not be made; it rather forms an inner unity of voluntary act and voluntary utterance. For the inner experience here is not possible without the utterance. And the utterance for its part is not some optional thing which is added from without, but is in the service of the social act, and is necessary if the act is to address the other (Reinach 2012: 20).⁴

⁴ External expressions are essential for human beings, but – according to Reinach – not for God, who can grasp the mental states of others regardless of whether they are expressed or not. Therefore, Reinach can describe the act of silently praying to God as a “purely interior social act” (Reinach 2012: 21).

Not only is this external expression essential to social acts, but the way they are expressed also differs from the way in which experiences such as shame, anger, or sadness are expressed. The latter can be expressed involuntarily, but commands, promises and requests are precisely bound to and dependent upon voluntary expressions.⁵ A promise exerted under duress or uttered while sleep talking, has no normative force, doesn't commit or bind the utterer, and ultimately doesn't qualify as a genuine promise.

To understand Reinach, it is, however, important to emphasize the difference between “in need of uptake” and “being taken up”. Whereas it belongs to the essence of social acts that they are in need of uptake, they will on Reinach's account still remain the acts they are, even if unsuccessfully such, if they aren't taken up by the addressee. As Reinach writes “If we put ourselves in the position of the promisor, we see that a genuine promise can be performed and expressed, yet without reaching the subject to whom it is directed” (2012: 28; see also Salice & Uemura 2018). If only one person was left alive on earth, that person would for Reinach still be able to perform social acts, although they would remain unsuccessful.

There is no reference to Reid's 1788 work *Essays on the active powers of man* in Reinach's monograph, but there are surprising similarities, since Reid also points to the difference between solitary and social acts of the mind. Whereas solitary acts such as perceiving and remembering can be accomplished “by a man in solitude” (Reid 2010: 330), social acts of the mind, such as acts of testifying, commanding and promising “can have no existence without the intervention of some other intelligent being, who acts a part in them” (Reid 2010: 330). Whereas the former acts can be expressed but do not have to be, i.e., whereas they are complete even without being expressed, when it comes to social acts, they cannot exist without being expressed publicly and be “known to the other party” (Reid 2010: 330).

As these latter formulations makes clear, Reid seems to be proposing what might be considered a more externalist account of social acts than Reinach. In a recent discussion of Reid's text, Richard Moran has rejected a deflationary reading of these passages according to which Reid merely wanted to distinguish genuine mental phenomena, which are all solitary, from the social effects that some mental phenomena might have. For Moran, Reid's position is more radical. There are genuinely mental acts that do not reside within the individual, but which

⁵ As much as Scheler highlights the importance of bodily expressivity, he is aware that there are dimensions of the mind that will remain hidden and concealed until the other decides to reveal and communicate them. If we wish to grasp what Scheler calls the ‘spiritual being of the other’ we consequently need to rely on communication and the power of language (Scheler 2008: 102, 225), but Scheler fails to link this insight to his discussion of the you.

relate distinct subjectivities to each other, and which can only be actualized through joint participation, i.e., which only come into being in so far as they are taken up by the addressee (Moran 2018: 2-3, 5).

Where does Husserl fit into all of this? Interestingly, and perhaps also slightly surprisingly, in his discussion of communication, Husserl seems closer to Reid than to Reinach.⁶ One possible explanation for this has to do with Husserl's and Reinach's diverging systematic focus. Whereas the I-you relation takes centre stage in Husserl's discussion of communicative acts (1973b: 171, 1973c: 478), Reinach doesn't address that topic at all, and is contrary to Husserl more interested in an exploration of the essential structures of legal entities such as claims and obligations than in the nature of sociality.

5. *Communicative connectedness*

In the manuscripts 'Communal spirit I' (1921) and 'Phenomenology of the communicative community' (1932), Husserl develops the idea that communication leads to an intentional intertwinement, co-determination, and unification of the involved subjects, where they are precisely no longer simply "for-one-another" but "within-each-other" (1973c: 475-476). What is required for such a social unification, which Husserl also labels an "I-you community" (1973c: 475), to come about?

As Naomi Eilan has recently pointed out, traditional discussions of uptake have rarely discussed the role of acknowledgment in normal communication, i.e., the fact that the addressee acknowledges to the addresser that the act of address has been taken up (Eilan 2020: 7). In her view, however, it is only by responding and thereby engaging in acts of mutual address that subjects are communicatively connected (Eilan 2020: 8). In addition, she has also argued that mutual address is a requirement for you-awareness.⁷ A second-person relation can never be unilateral. Eilan calls this the *mutual interdependence claim* (Eilan 2020: 8, 13). For me to relate to another as a you is for me to relate to and address someone, who in turn relates to and addresses me as a you. To that extent, there cannot be a single you: there always have to be at least two (Zahavi 2015). A number of important corollaries follow from this. It is clearly not sufficient for a second-personal relation that A addresses B as someone who could potentially

⁶ For more on how to position Husserl in the internalism-externalism debate see Zahavi 2017b: 77-136.

⁷ One should consequently distinguish the requirements for second-personal address and you-awareness from a discussion of the proper use of the second-person singular pronoun. When entering the flat of a friend, I might yell "where are you" thinking that he is at home, whereas in fact I am alone. Likewise, I might enter the bedroom, see that my partner is sound asleep, and say "I love you".

address A. What is needed is not the possibility of mutuality, but its actualization. Even more importantly, whether I encounter someone from a second- or third-person perspective isn't simply up to me and my intentional stance. I cannot unilaterally transform a he or a she into a you. Rather, you-awareness is a joint accomplishment and requires the participation of both parties.

Husserl would concur:

I, as the motivating subject, do not merely stand next to the other as other in the original social I-you relationship, rather I motivate him, he motivates me; and in the distinct relation that the I-you relationship establishes through social acts, there is a unity of striving or specific willing that embraces both subjects, and in which both are reciprocally related to one another (Husserl 1973b: 171).

When subjects adopt attitudes of mutual address towards each other, they motivate each other intentionally, and Husserl also speaks of this interplay and interlocking of address and response in terms of a coincidence of I and you (*Ich-Du-Deckung*) (Husserl 1973c: 476). My intentional subjectivity incorporates the other's intentional subjectivity and vice versa and this even holds true – according to Husserl – in cases of disagreement and conflict. Even antagonistic encounters in which we are 'against-each-other' count as cases in which I and another are 'within-one-another', instead of being merely 'next-to' or 'for-each other' (Husserl 1973c: 477).

One way to understand this claim is to think of the addressee's response – be it affirmative or negative – as an acknowledgment of the address; an acknowledgment that establishes a communicative connectedness. Even when the interlocutor contradicts the speaker, even when the former rejects the request of the latter, they are taking different positions on something shared and will be participating in a reciprocal process of intentional co-determination (Husserl 1973a: 473, 1973c: 396).

On this account, communicative engagement is a joint accomplishment, something that by necessity involves the contribution of a multiplicity of subjects. As Frith once put it:

Communication, when we confront each other face-to-face, is not a one-way process from me to you. The way you respond to me alters the way I respond to you. This is a communication loop. [...] This is the big difference from my interactions with the physical world. The physical world is utterly indifferent to my attempts to interpret it.

But when two people interact face-to-face, their exchange of meaning is a cooperative venture. The flow is never just one-way (Frith 2007: 175).

As should have become clear by now, Husserl's account of the I-you relation is normatively quite undemanding and to that extent quite different from Buber's.⁸ Husserl is not saying that an I-you relation is necessarily non-hierarchical, characterized by attitudes of mutual esteem and equal respect and a concern for the well-being and dignity of the other. On the contrary, up to a certain point, relations of conflict or even abuse would still qualify as second-personal on his account. What might be the limit? Husserl is not very explicit here, but his reference to disagreement and rejection might provide a hint. To address someone is to acknowledge the other's autonomy, and thereby also the other's freedom to say no and talk back. If you are simply running off a pre-set script with no interest in what the person you are addressing might say, and with no willingness to adapt your actions in response to how the person is replying, you are on the wrong track.

6. *I-you co-dependency*

It is not possible to adopt a second-person perspective on one's own. I cannot relate to another second-personally (rather than third-personally) by simply changing my intentional stance vis-à-vis the other. The person I am relating to must herself be a participatory agent. Rather than seeing you-awareness as an individual cognitive achievement, it might consequently be better to see it instead as a joint accomplishment, as "a social action in which two co-agents are involved" (Dullstein 2014: 314).

The reference to one action with two agents does, however, raise some questions about how to understand the intertwinement, unification, and unity in question. Some actions cannot be done alone, but only with others. If a couple is dancing rumba, it would be wrong to describe what is happening as a situation where A is dancing rumba and B is doing so as well at the same time and at the same place. Rather, whatever else A and B might be doing, insofar as they are dancing rumba, they are not performing two independent actions, but jointly performing one and the same action together. Something similar might be said of a conversational

⁸ Theunissen once argued that one of the important differences between Husserl and Buber was that whereas Husserl's focus was on the perceptual manifestation of the other, Buber considered language "the home of the Thou" (1984: 295). But since Husserl takes mutual communicative address to constitute the core of what it means to relate second-personally to one another (Husserl 1973b: 307), the difference between the two has to be located elsewhere.

exchange or dialogue. But is it also correct to argue that the second-personal nexus of address and response binds the subjects together such that they constitute a joint subject of a joint act of interpersonal knowledge, as has recently been proposed by Lauer (2014: 327, 338)?

It depends on what is meant by “a joint act of interpersonal knowledge”. Whereas it might be permissible and appropriate to talk of a joint action as *one* action that we are performing together, I don’t see any compelling reasons to embrace the suggestion that one and the same experiential process of knowing is shared by two subjects. Although the I-you nexus does bind two subjects together, it is precisely an intertwining of two *different* but constitutively interrelated experiential perspectives; there is no fusional unity, no common stream of consciousness. This situation is not unlike that of joint attention, which also doesn’t involve a fusion of perspectives, but an awareness of the fact that different perspectives are brought to bear on the same target (León 2021).

It is one thing to argue that my awareness of the other through address is bound up with her awareness of me through address, and that I can only relate to and address another as a you, if the person in question is reciprocating and also relating to me as a you. To argue in this fashion is, as already mentioned, to endorse the *mutual interdependence claim* when it comes to you-awareness. But Eilan also defends what she calls the *I-you claim* (Eilan 2020: 13), which is the claim that I and you are co-dependent. This claim, however, is itself open to several different interpretations. One interpretation targets the reversibility of I and you. Here is how Longworth puts it:

it has been held that in a case in which someone addressed one by the use of ‘You’, understanding that use would require that one thought an ‘I’-thought about oneself. And it might also be held that in a case in which someone addressed one by using ‘I’, understanding that use would require that one thought a ‘You’-thought about the speaker (Longworth 2014: 290).

Some, however, have been tempted by an even stronger reading of the I-you claim, namely one where it is one’s very being as an I or self that depends upon second-personal address. Some of Buber’s formulations can be read in such a fashion – “Man becomes an I through a You” (Buber 1970: 80) –, and Fichte famously wrote “No Thou, no I: no I, no Thou” (Fichte 1982: 172-173).

But is it plausible to claim that there is no I without a you and that the first-person is constituted and individuated by second-personal interaction? It is not unreasonable to claim

that full mastery of the first-person pronoun depends upon a mastery of the other personal pronouns. It is also not particularly controversial to insist that social interaction and the exposure to a plurality of points of views is a precondition for the child coming to realize that it has distinct access to its own experiences. There are also good arguments for the claim that our social identities depend upon social interaction. But does all of this entail that the first-person, the I, the self, is constituted in dialogical situations of address? Much obviously hangs on precisely what one means by these terms. Consider the two following quite different accounts:

1. According to Mead, the distinctive and defining feature of a self is that it can take itself as an object (1962: 136), and for him this is something that only happens indirectly, namely insofar as the individual adopts the attitude or perspective of the other towards itself (1962: 138): “Self-consciousness involves the individual’s becoming an object to himself by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within an organized setting of social relationships” and unless the individual has “thus become an object to himself he would not be self-conscious or have a self at all” (1962: 225). For Mead, selfhood is the outcome of a socially enabled self-objectification, and that is indeed why he can argue that selves rather than being antecedent to the social process are products of social interaction (1962: 50), and that “No hard-and-fast line can be drawn between our own selves and the selves of others, since our own selves exist and enter as such into our experience only in so far as the selves of others exist and enter as such into our experience also” (1962: 164).

2. As insightful and influential as Mead’s analysis has been, some might worry that it doesn’t really get to the heart of what a first-person perspective really amounts to. So let us consider the following alternative: Our experiential life isn’t merely distinguished by its qualitative features but also by its subjective character. There is not simply something it is like – qualitatively speaking – to taste Bowmore, to feel nausea, or to enjoy a performance of the Swan Lake, because when we do so, the experiences are not simply given as free-floating anonymous events. When feeling nauseous, I am not faced with a two-step process in which I first detect the presence of an unpleasant experience, and then wonder whose experience it might be. Rather, experiences are from the outset like something *for* a subject, they involve a point of view, they come with *perspectival ownership*. Rather than simply to speak of the what-it-is-likeness of experience, it might consequently be more accurate to speak of the what-it-is-like-*for-me*-ness of experience (Zahavi & Kriegel 2016). To deny the first-personal character of experience, i.e., the ineliminable perspectivalness of phenomenal consciousness, to deny that we have a distinctly different acquaintance with our own experiential life than with the experiential life of others (and vice versa), and that this difference obtains, not only when we

introspect or reflect, but already in the very having of experience, is to fail to recognize an essential dimension of experience (Zahavi 2005, 2014, 2020). To use a formulation of Galen Strawson's, if experience exists, subjectivity exists, and that entails that subject-of-experience-hood exists (Strawson 2009: 419). But how much sense does it make to suggest that this kind of experiential selfhood comes about as a result of being addressed by a you?

I have criticized social constructivist accounts of subjectivity and first-personal experience on various previous occasions (Zahavi 2014, 2021, 2022), so let me here just briefly return to the (minimal) normative dimension of second-personal address: it involves a recognition of the other's autonomy. My interlocutor has a subjective perspective of her own. This is what makes agreement and collaboration as well as conflict and disagreement possible in the first place. A question to ask is whether an insistence on the fundamental co-dependency of I and you is able to retain and secure the required perspectival autonomy. In reality, the strong co-dependency claim is often cashed out in one of the three following ways. 1) You constitute me and I constitute you. 2) I and you emerge from a common ground of undifferentiation. 3) The I is constituted by the you, which is *de facto* given primacy. But whereas the first proposal seems circular, the two latter seems incapable of preserving the required difference and diversity. Some ontological independence must be preserved.⁹ As the legendary Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787-1859) is reported to have said, "If I am I, because you are you, and you are you, because I am I, then I am not I, and you are not you. But if I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I and you are you, and we can talk" (cited in Berkowitz 1970: 115). To put it differently, arguing that we are constitutively co-dependent runs the risk of undermining the very difference between our experiential perspectives, runs the risk of eliminating the very plurality that must be presupposed in order to talk meaningfully of any inter-subjective relation. To illustrate this risk, consider Welsh, who in her work on Merleau-Ponty, has argued that we initially do not exist as subjects, but as participants in an anonymous pre-subjective collectivity, where there is not yet any boundaries between self and other, and from which the child must then slowly learn to differentiate itself from others belonging to the same sphere of experience (Welsh 2013: 49, 50, 55, 58).

However, one can reject any radical claims regarding an absolute I-you co-dependency, while still granting that there are important forms of self-knowledge and other-knowledge that

⁹ Concerns of this kind was famously at the heart of Levinas' objection to Buber (Levinas 1996: 32; see also Meindl et al. 2019).

are constitutively integrated and intertwined. That this is precisely the case in I-you relations was recognized by Husserl, who highlighted the self-transformative character of the encounter. As he writes, I come to be a “personal subject, come to attain personal ‘self-consciousness’, in the I-you relation” (Husserl 1973b: 171, see also 1989: 331). When standing in a second-personal relation, when addressing somebody who responds, I am not merely aware of the other, but simultaneously aware of myself as being addressed by and attended to by the other (Husserl 1973a: 211). Second-personal engagement consequently involves not merely an awareness of the other, but also and at the same time, a form of interpersonal (or socially mediated) self-consciousness.

7. Conclusion

To stand in an I-you relation is to stand in a relation of mutual address, where you experience the other as a subject with a perspective on yourself and vice versa. Not only is your experience of the other and your self-experience intertwined but it is also bound up and synchronously co-regulated with her self-experience and her experience of you. To relate to another as a you is a joint accomplishment. It is something that cannot be effectuated by a single subject, but which by its very nature requires the contribution of several individuals. The main reason why references to social perception, bodily intervention, emotional engagement, or unprejudiced openness fail to capture what is distinctive about second-personal relations is precisely that they all underestimate the importance of reciprocal co-determination. Whatever is happening when you observe another person’s expressive behaviour, or feel addressed and moved by an actor in a movie, or work creatively with clay, it doesn’t qualify as a strong subject-subject relation, where the participants are intentionally intertwined.

But why is all of this of relevance? Why spend time investigating the I-you relationship? As we have seen, one motivation for the you-turn was a dissatisfaction with existing (spectatorial) accounts of social cognition together with the assumption that an account that focused on second-personal engagement might be more ecologically valid. As Schutz once pointed out, one obvious advantage of the latter is that it gives you the unique possibility of having your beliefs about the other confirmed or disconfirmed by direct questions (Schutz 1967: 140, 174). By asking you directly, “I can correct, expand, and enrich my own understanding of you” (1967: 171). In Husserl, however, we find a different reason. As a study of his writings quickly makes clear, Husserl was of the conviction that an analysis of the dyadic

I-you relation was crucial for a proper understanding of collective intentionality and social reality:

All sociality is based [...] on the actual connexion of the communicative community, the mere community of address and uptake of address, or more precisely, of addressing and listening. [...] In addressing and taking up the address, me and another I reach a first unification. I am not only for myself, and the other is not only another in front of me, rather the other is my you, and in addressing, listening, and replying we already form a We that is unified and communalized in a particular manner (Husserl 1973c: 475-476).

What a Husserlian account of collective intentionality amounts to and whether Husserl was right in claiming that every I-you relation already constitutes a (minimal) we are, however, topics for another time (see also Szanto 2016, Zahavi 2019, Meindl and Zahavi in press).

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