EMPATHY AND RECOGNITION

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Abstract

The concept of "recognition" is traditionally linked to the ethical and social dimension of the human being. The paper proposes a different history of this concept, linking it to the sphere of knowledge. The story starts from Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, in particular from the aesthetic judgement, and finds a fundamental stage in the reflection of the Munich philosopher and psychologist Theodor Lipps. For Lipps, the capacity to recognise (objects or other subjects) is closely intertwined with and dependent on the emotional dimension and on our empathic capacity (*Einfühlung*). Empathic recognition is a way of knowing the world, although it is constantly exposed to misunderstandings and mistakes that can lead to misinterpretation and misrecognition of objects and other subjects. In conclusion, the text argues for the need to distinguish between empathic-cognitive recognition, which recognises the characteristics of the "object" in question, and the recognition of the (ethical, aesthetic or social) value that this "object" is intended to have.

Keywords: Aesthetic Judgement, Lipps, Emotions, Knowledge, Misrecognition.

1. *Recognitions*

The contemporary use of the German word *Anerkennung* – rendered in neo-Latin languages, but also in English, with terms derived from the Latin *recognōscĕre* (the compound of *re-* and *cognōscĕre*) – concerns almost exclusively the human ethical and social dimension. The term became philosophically relevant with the Hegelian *Kampf um Anerkennung*,[1] and became the object of a renewed interest in the 1990s following its reformulation in the 'recognition theory'.[2] In this perspective, the concept of

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1   The pages on the struggle for recognition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* are well known. On this subject, I will only refer to L. Siep, H. Ikäheimo, M. Quante, *Handbuch Anerkennung*, Springer, Berlin 2021.

2   It was especially Axel Honneth who took up the concept of *Struggle for Recognition* in his 1992 *Kampf um Anerkennung. Zur moralischen Grammatik sozialer*

'recognition' is intertwined with that of 'identity', and it can be argued that the struggles for equal rights – of workers, ethnic minorities, women or the LGBTQ+ community – should be understood as struggles for the recognition of the different identities at stake. Framing these political movements in terms of recognition highlights the inherently relational character of morality and justice: justice is not exclusively concerned with how many possessions a person should have, but rather what kind of position he or she has or should have towards other people.[3]

Today, however, some authors are highlighting the limited scope of the concept of recognition thus understood.[4] A distinction is therefore being proposed between a narrower understanding of recognition, according to which only those who can recognise can be recognised, and a wider conception that does not accept this limitation, arguing that the notion of recognition should not be tied to two-way reciprocity. In this second version, it is also possible to recognise other beings in addition to those who are, themselves, capable of recognition. This perspective, being broader, tends to encompass the first.

This line of interpretation partly draws – more or less consciously – on the prevailing conception of "*Anerkennung*" in the German philosophy of the first half of the 20th century. Authors as diverse as Frege, Husserl, Rickert or Lipps regarded recognition as a process closely linked to the sphere of knowledge. If, according to Frege, to judge means essentially to recognise (*anerkennen*) the truth of a thought,[5] for Husserl in his *Logical Investigations* the recognition (*Anerkennung*) of the judgment act is what

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     Konflikte. The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1995, but the subject has also been widely investigated in Ch. Taylor, *The Politics of Recognition*, in A. Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992 pp. 25-73, and in J. Habermas, *Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State*, in A. Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism. Examining the Politics of Recognition*, cit., pp. pp. 107-148.

3   M. Iser, *Recognition* in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/recognition/>. Cf. also I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1990.

4   Cf. A. Laitinen*, On the Scope of 'Recognition'. The Role of Adequate Regard and Mutuality*, in H.-C. Schmidt am Busch, C. Zurn (eds.), *The Philosophy of Recognition. Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Lexington Books, Plymouth 2010, pp. 319-342.

5   G. Frege, *Der Gedanke. Eine logische Untersuchung*, in "Beiträge zur Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus", 1, 1918/9, pp. 58-77.

allows us to approve a representation.[6] According to these authors, in short, recognition is a fundamental step in the cognitive process, which is broadly addressed to representations and not exclusively to other subjects.

The same theme was developed by the Baden neo-Kantian school and, in particular, by Rickert. According to the latter, reality has a claim (Rickert uses the term *Forderung*[7]) on the subject, which is not passive in its knowledge of the world but is rather called upon to an activity of affirmation or negation; that is, it recognises the form of objects and, more generally, of reality. The recognition of the forms of the real, which makes claims on the subject,[8] determines our knowledge of empirical reality. In our cognition, in fact, we affirm or deny something, and the dimension of feeling plays a fundamental role in this process: it is in fact a "feeling of pleasure or displeasure"[9] that determines our affirmation or denial, that is, our recognition of things. In every act of knowledge we feel evidence that obliges us to judge thus and not otherwise. "When I want to judge, I am bound by the feeling of evidence, I cannot arbitrarily affirm or deny".[10] Form presents itself as something that demands recognition, something that *must* be affirmed.[11]

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6   Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen*, *Zweiter Teil. Untersuchungen zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Erkenntnis*, hrsg. U. Panzer, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1984; trans. eng. by D. Moran, *Logical Investigations Volume 2*. Routledge, Milton Park 2006, V, § 29.

7   The theme of *Aufforderung* (usually translated into English as "summons") is found in Fichte's *Naturrecht*. Fichte understands it as a kind of external check (*Anstoss*) that prompts the subject to activity and enables it to find itself while leaving it "in full possession of its freedom to be self-determining". See J.G. Fichte. *Foundations of Natural Right According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre* [1796], ed. Frederick Neuhouser, tr. M. Baur, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, §3, III.

8   The subject is obviously understood as consciousness in general. In fact, it is important to emphasise that this process takes place on a transcendental rather than empirical level: reality demands recognition, but once its form has been predicated it falls within the immanence of consciousness. In the first part of the first edition of *Der Gegenstand* (which remains unchanged in the second) Rickert clarifies the relationship between the empirical subject and the transcendental subject or consciousness in general. The latter is a kind of borderline idea opposing everything that can be contained in it (including empirical consciousness or the psychological subject). Cf. H. Rickert*, Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis. Einführung in die Transzendentalphilosophie,* Mohr*,* Tübingen 1904, pp. 11.

9   H. Rickert, *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der philosophischen Transcendenz*, J.C.B. Mohr, Freiburg 1892, p. 57.

10   *Ibid.*, p. 61.

11   H. Rickert*, Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis* (1904), cit., p. 116.

2. *The other Kant*

The idea that recognition is a gnoseological process involving our relationship with the world in general, and not exclusively with other subjects, thus develops another side of the concept that does not originate from Kant's practical philosophy and the "feeling of respect" (*Achtung*), but rather from the meaning Kant attributes to reflective judgement in the third *Critique*. For many early 20th-century authors who can be broadly placed within the Kantian tradition, the problem of knowledge, addressed by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is not fully resolved by the relationship between categories and the world, according to which the only valid knowledge is the scientific-natural kind. If we define nature as "the existence of things, insofar as that existence is determined according to universal laws",[12] individual and singular reality escapes this definition. In this perspective, 'nature' is only the object of investigation of the natural sciences – a concept that is too connoted in terms of universal laws to describe our actual relationship with our surroundings. The third *Critique*, however, represents Kant's attempt to resolve or at least smooth out this difficulty: there are other forms of knowledge and relation to the world, the validity of which is not universal and necessary, but subjective because it is linked to pleasure and displeasure.

In particular, it was Rickert who developed and broadened the epistemological potential of the first type of reflective judgement, i.e. the aesthetic judgement (or judgement of taste), in which Kant had outlined a form of knowledge that concerns the individual and involves pleasure and displeasure. It is important to note that Kant here speaks of "judgement" even though he refers to an activity that is not directly aimed at knowledge. Rather, in the aesthetic judgment representation is not linked to a concept, but to a feeling of pleasure or displeasure. Pleasure does not say anything about the object, but makes it manifest how "the subject feels himself, [namely] how he is affected by the presentation".[13] After all, the feeling of pleasure and displeasure is nothing more than the "vital force" of the subject.

Now, Kant does not use the word "judgement" at random, because if it is true that the aesthetic judgement "designates nothing whatsoever in

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12   I. Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics: That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science*: With Selections from the Critique of Pure Reason, ed. G. Hatfield, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, §14, p. 46.

13   Cf. I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis 1987, p. 44.

the object", it is also true that this relationship between perception and the feeling of pleasure does tell us *something*. What is predicated in aesthetic judgement is not placed on the objective side, but rather on the subjective side of the relationship. Kant clarifies:

> The green color of meadows belongs to objective sensation, i.e., to the perception of an object of sense […] to feeling […] through which the object is regarded as an object of our liking (which is not a cognition of it).[14]

The fact remains that pleasantness, while being a subjective sensation, refers to the object as its quality. Kant writes:

> What is strange and different about a judgment of taste is only this: that what is to be connected with the presentation of the object is not an empirical concept but a feeling of pleasure (hence no concept at all), though, just as if it were a predicate connected with cognition of the object, this feeling is nevertheless to be required of everyone.[15]

Pleasantness is therefore only a subjective property, but at the same time it also concerns the "green meadow" phenomenon, because it is a property of its manifestation. In this sense the judgement of taste does say something of what we perceive: it tells us that it is beautiful, pleasant, agreeable, even if to say of a green lawn that it is pleasant does not mean "to know something that belongs to its content, but only to highlight a general condition of its manifestation".[16]

The aesthetic judgment is therefore a way of knowing the object that directly involves the subject and their feelings. But how are we to think of this sentimental activation? As we have seen, Kant speaks of pleasure and displeasure, and Rickert takes up this element by considering the transcendental subject no longer as a representational self but as a judgmental self, which is questioned by the object. Thus knowledge in general, when concerning our relationship with the world around us in its individuality and singularity, is configured as a process in which the norm (which is the form of the object) imposes itself and claims to be recognised. But the whole recognition process is determined through feelings, and "feelings, considered from a psychological point of view, are pleasure or displeasure".[17]

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14   *Ibid.*, p. 48.
15   *Ibid.*, p. 31.
16   P. Spinicci, *Lezioni sulle proprietà espressive*, www.filosofia.unimi.it, 2013/14, p. 15.
17   H. Rickert, *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis* (1904), cit., p. 106.

3. *The role of feeling in recognition: empathy*

However, how this feeling of pleasure and displeasure, which acquires such an important role in our relationship with the world, should be thought of remains unclear in the neo-Kantian discussion.

A very important contribution to the investigation of the feeling involved in the recognition of the world around us comes instead from the Munich psychologist and philosopher Theodor Lipps. Lipps, too, describes our way of knowing the world in terms of recognition and response to a demand. The real difference (at least as far as we are concerned here) with respect to the transcendental framework of the neo-Kantian Rickert lies in Lipps's 'psychologism', for which logical, aesthetic or ethical laws are essentially laws that concern our psychic processes, through which we know, appreciate and evaluate the facts with which we relate. It is the facts, in this perspective, that make claims (*Forderung*) and demand recognition (*Anerkennung*).

It is now a matter of understanding how our sentimental activation works, i.e. what it means that we experience pleasure and displeasure in relation to things and what it means that this pleasure and displeasure are part of the cognitive process we call recognition. Lipps's hypothesis is that we are emotionally activated by things (by their shape, their structure, how they move, etc.) and that this happens through a kind of mimetic mechanism, according to which we feel pleasure or displeasure 'in' the thing and not 'in front of' it. The object mimetically awakens our experiences with its characteristics: the clearest example is perhaps that of melody, in which I recognise "an aspiration to flee or a tendency to contain oneself," yet all this is nothing more than my activity, my vital inner movement, but objectified.[18]

The interesting element is that even though these are forms in which the life of the self is reified in the object – the sweetness of a melody or the threatening nature of a storm – "they immediately appear to me as real objects",[19] as if they were qualities present in the object and not due to the self. A melody cannot only be described through the individual notes that compose it, but also requires mentioning its qualitative and emotional aspects. Its sweet, haunting or distressing nature is an essential part of its being an object for me. This experience is viewed by Lipps as a character-

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[18]   Th. Lipps, *Erkenntnisquellen. Einfühlung*, in *Leitfaden der Psychologie*, Engelmann, Leipzig 1909, cap. XIII, pp. 222-241, p. 225.

[19]   *Ibid.*

istic of our relationship with the world. When an object exists for me and demands recognition, "it is by no means just something sensibly given, in the same way as a house is not a mere pile of bricks"; together with matter, in fact, there is form. But form "is my activity". Every determined object "is necessarily permeated by my life".[20] And it is precisely this ability to objectify our emotional life in the world around us that Lipps calls empathy (*Einfühlung*).[21]

Lipps considers the object as the result of two components, "that is, of what is sensibly given and of my activity". Things "demand recognition" and awaken my activity, which is not arbitrary, but "necessary": to become objects with which I relate, things must be interpenetrated by my activity through a "self-activation" which involves recognising in the object characteristics that awaken subjective activity. Just as in Kant's aesthetic judgement, the subject feels itself (its vital feeling) in the object. As mentioned above, this type of emotional activation is defined by Lipps as "empathising" (*Einfühlen*). It is a sentimental, not a physiological activation, for empathising "does not mean to have the sensation (*empfinden*) of something in one's own body, but rather to feel (*fühlen*) something in the object".[22]

With this concept of empathy Lipps makes an important contribution to the full appreciation of the epistemological potential of the judgement of taste, transforming it from a reflective to a determining judgement: feeling determines our knowledge of the world around us, and is one of the three

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20 Th. Lipps, *Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuss*, in "Die Zukunft", 54, 1906, pp. 100-114, here pp. 105-106.

21 As his student Moritz Geiger pointed out, in Lipps's framework "this apprehension of things as empathy of one's own apprehension represents the psychological reinterpretation of the synthetic unity of Kantian apperception". Cf. M. Geiger, *Über das Wesen und Bedeutung der Einfühlung*, in *Bericht über den vierten Kongress für experimentelle Psychologie in Innsbruck vom 19. Bis 22. April 1910*, Barth, Leipzig 1911, pp. 29-73, p. 53. When I 'apperceive' an object, I experience a certain mode of my inner behaviour – such as joy or sadness – but "as if it belonged to the apperceived object". Cf. Th. Lipps, *Erkenntnisquellen.*, cit., 222. Here Lipps uses the term 'apperception' to refer to the fact that the self 'feels', is present to itself, in a series of concrete acts that take place in individual consciousness. "Pleasure manifests itself insofar as a psychic process finds favourable conditions for its apperception in the soul, or insofar as it agrees with the conditions for apperception dictated by the soul", Th. Lipps, *Ästhetik. Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst*, vol. II: *Die ästhetische Betrachtung und die bildende Kunst*, Voss, Hamburg 1906, p. 11.

22 Th. Lipps, *Einfühlung, innere Nachahmung, und Organempfindungen*, in "Archiv für die gesamte Psychologie", 3, 2-3, 1903, pp. 185-204, here p. 202.

sources of knowledge. Together with sensory perception, through which I "know about things" in the world, and internal perception, which allows me to know "about myself", there is in fact empathy, which is generally what allows me to grasp "the objectification of myself in an object other than myself".[23] In fact, the object is always

> something interpenetrating with my activity. And activity is life. The word 'life' has really no other sense than that of 'activity'. Therefore, every object that exists for me as this particular object – other objects do not exist for me – is necessarily and obviously interpenetrated by my life. And this is the most general sense of 'empathy'.[24]

Even in the most basic example, that of a line scribbled on a piece of paper, we must acknowledge – according to Lipps – the relevance of the empathic relationship. The line is a "vehicle" of forces such as "tension and relaxation" or even "starting, proceeding and stopping", "widening and narrowing". But all this activity, which characterises the line as well as the relation between the line and the other elements of space, is actually "placed in things by me. Not arbitrarily, however, but necessarily".[25] In essence, we cannot help but recognise things as qualitatively connoted: frightening or joyful, sad or disturbing.

Empathy, thus conceived, becomes a source of knowledge. But its characteristic is precisely that it implies a relational dimension of knowledge: I know aspects of the world, but first of all I know aspects of myself, because empathy is always the objectification of myself in the object. Empathy is a mode of being of the subject who relates to the world, whether animate or inanimate. Lipps argues that shapes, colours and movements lead us to recognise qualitative characteristics in objects – or, to say it *à la* Fichte, in the "Not-I",[26] because the question concerns objects and subjects without distinction. But there is a Not-I only insofar as there is an I that intends it. The demand of the object can therefore only arise to the extent that the subject turns its spiritual gaze on it, that is it, he perceives it and recognises its characteristics.[27]

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23   Th. Lipps, *Erkenntnisquellen*, cit., p. 222.
24   Th. Lipps, *Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuss*, cit., p. 106.
25   *Ibid*, p. 108.
26   F. Fabbianelli, *Theodor Lipps' metaphysische Psychologie*, in T. Lipps, *Schriften zur Psychologie und Erkenntnistheorie*, 4 Bde., Ergon, Würzburg 2013, 1, pp. VII-LXIII.
27   F. Fabbianelli, *Il microcosmo e lo specchio. L'etica della personalità in Theodor Lipps*, in "Archivio di Storia della cultura", XXXIV (2021), pp. 87-100.

In the brief overview I have offered so far, recognition is understood as addressed to reality as such (not only to subjects); in this view, the capacity to recognise is closely intertwined with, and dependent on, the emotional and relational dimension, thereby enhancing the cognitive role of the emotional sphere. This emotional dimension – thanks to Lipps's contribution – has taken shape as *Einfühlung*. Thus far, however, I have only dealt with objects. It is now a question of taking the last step in the present analysis of the interweaving between recognition and empathy, investigating what happens when the object in front of me is another subject.

4. *Empathy as a source of recognition of the other subject*

When I see another person, I find an expression of spontaneity and autonomous sentimental vivacity. More generally, if it is true that "every sensory object demands activity of me",[28] implying a recognition, it is also true that "the highest demand is made of me by the sensory appearance of the human being".[29] The demand for recognition made by another subject is obviously clearer and stronger than that of an object. One must not forget, however, that here 'recognition' is not to be understood as it is used by Critical Theory, in the sense that has become dominant in the philosophical debate today. Here the other subject demands to be recognised on the basis of their characteristics as another subject different from me, the bearer of an autonomous psychic life, characterised by feelings and thoughts,[30] without any ethical-practical connotation.

Just as when observing an object (think of the example of a melody or a stormy sea), in interpersonal *Einfühlung*, the observer, starting from the movements of the observed subject, unconsciously projects their own experiences activated by the observation of the other's behaviour. Lipps strongly emphasises the instinctive and immediate nature of this relationship, explicitly taking a stance against the "analogical" conception, which was as popular then as it is today: one must not view empathy as a rational process, in terms of an analogy in which I imagine how I would feel if I were in the place of the other person.

Lipps's example is well known: a spectator watching an acrobat perform a dangerous trick experiences the acrobat's suspension "in the first

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28   Th. Lipps, *Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuss*, cit., p. 103.
29   *Ibid.*, p. 109.
30   The problem for Lipps is to clarify how we relate to an otherness other than ourselves.

person";[31] that is, they reproduce within themselves the movements performed by the acrobat, internally imitating the actions observed and, in this way, completely identifying with the performer. The spectator becomes "one" with the observed and, at the same time, self-objectifies in the acrobat.[32] In authentic empathy there is no distinction between my own self and the other's self, or rather – to continue with the example – there is neither myself nor the acrobat's self, but rather an ideal self. Likewise, the space in which the empathic relationship takes place is also "ideal": when we feel like we are up there with the acrobat we are not in a real place, but rather in an ideal place that is neither the tightrope on which the acrobat is walking, nor the armchair in which our real self continues to be comfortably seated.[33]

But how should we conceive of this "imitation"[34] that characterises the empathic relationship? Let us start by observing the acrobatic movements of the man on the tightrope: an insecure gait or a momentary loss of balance can produce in me, the observer sitting in my armchair, feelings of fear or an unpleasant physical sensation of vertigo. Without my being aware of it, the acrobat's body with its movements triggers an imitative process in me. This unconscious and instinctive process happens because

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31 This example can be already found in Smith: "The mob, when they are gazing at a dancer on a slack rope, naturally writhe and twist and balance their own bodies, as they see him do, and as they feel they themselves must do in his situation", *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, A. Millar, A. Kincaid and J. Bell in Edinburgh, 3rd edition, 1767, p. 3.

32 Th. Lipps, *Ästhetik. Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst*, vol. I: *Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, Voss, Hamburg und Leipzig 1906, p. 122.

33 In this sense Lipps can be considered a supporter of the so-called "actuality principle". According to the purporters of this theoretical framework, empathic experiences become 'actual' experiences for those who have them: thus by empathising with the acrobat I am at one with his experience. Cf. M. Geiger, *Über das Wesen und Bedeutung der Einfühlung*, cit., p. 33.

34 See the Lippsian concept of imitation in Th. Lipps, *Einfühlung, innere Nachahmung, und Organempfindungen*, cit., pp. 185-204. It is interesting to note that a few years before Lipps, Gabriel Tarde had spoken of laws of imitation that characterise and ground the social world. The concept of "imitation" for Tarde is strongly connected to that of sympathy. For Tarde, every social bond consists of the "reflection of one brain into another", but for "unilateral sympathy to develop and become mutual" it needs to be expressed. And it is precisely through imitation that – before the spoken word – reciprocal sympathy was able to manifest itself: "the tamed began to follow the tamer, to walk behind him, to do what he did, to copy his gestures" Cf. G. Tarde, *L'interpsychologie*, in "Archives d'anthropologie criminelle", 19, 1904, pp. 536-564. See also G. Tarde, *Les lois de l'imitation: étude sociologique*, Alcan, Paris 1890.

my visual perception[35] of the acrobat's movements is associated with a "kinaesthetic image", which is the set of sensory contents that arise from watching the movement.

Empathy can be traced back to two human drives: the drive for vital manifestation and the drive for external imitation. The first is "the communication of internal processes by means of bodily processes," i.e. the fact that internal states, such as sadness or joy, also find expression in external gestures: from smiling to crying, from blushing to shivering. I do not experience a sad gesture, Lipps clarifies, as "something that comes with sadness, but as something present in it".[36] When we observe a gesture, the second drive identified by Lipps comes into play: the tendency to reproduce that gesture. But that gesture is an "inseparable component of my sadness", which leads me to also reproduce the feeling of "sadness, which forms a single experience with it".[37]

I thus find myself reliving the internal state I experienced when I made those gestures myself. However, this is not – I repeat – a matter of reasoning. On the contrary, all this happens on an "unconscious" level, as Lipps points out: a level that excludes awareness and that allows me to experience the other's feelings in the first person. However, just as in the relationship with objects, these feelings are attributed to the other person. The impulse to imitate drives me to a mimetic activity that is essentially internal, psychic imitation. External imitation is rather rare and largely irrelevant to the empathic dynamic while, on the contrary, "a form or degree of internal imitation and also a tendency to external imitation is always present".[38]

Since in the course of my life I have had certain emotional experiences and have expressed them through given gestures, even the inward reproduction of those gestures entails that I feel those affects. The gesture has become an "index" of, say, fear or joy: "the affect has attached itself [to the gesture] as that which expresses itself in it".[39] Insofar as the other person's

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35 Lipps calls this an "optical image". Cf. Th. Lipps, *Ästhetik. Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst*, vol. I: *Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, cit., p. 115

36 Th. Lipps, *Erkenntnisquellen. Einfühlung*, cit., p. 229. Between gesture and sentimental element there is a relationship that Lipps calls symbolic. In a polemical response to Witasek, Lipps admits in a 1904 essay that in earlier works he had mistakenly labelled the relationship between feeling and gesture as an associative one. Cf. Th. Lipps, *Weiteres zur "Einfühlung"*, in "Archiv für die gesamte Psychologie", 4, 1904, pp. 465-519, p. 466.

37 *Ibid*.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 483.

39 Th. Lipps, *Das Wissen vom Fremden Ichen*, in *Psychologische Untersuchungen I*, Engelmann, Leipzig 1907, pp. 694-722, p. 719.

gesture awakens an experience I have had myself, I am able to empathise with them and feel their fear or joy. I unconsciously project onto the other person the state of mind that has been awakened in *me*.

This process, however, is the reverse of that posited by analogical theories, and helps us understand the relevance of the *relational* dimension of empathy. When I am happy or angry, my facial expression is not the direct object of my perception, yet I have a fairly clear representation of what I look like when I am having those feelings, even though I do not have "a mirror at hand while anger is consuming me". I do not need a mirror because I've acquired awareness of my expression "from observing the faces of others". This is a "reversal" of the classical analogy approach because it highlights how important the role of the other is in the constitution of one's identity. It is through the other's smile or tears that I know myself and my own expressions: "in short, I know that my anger corresponds to a precise change in my face because I know that they correspond in the other, and not the other way round".[40]

The empathic relationship and the recognition of the experiences of others is therefore an essential process for the recognition of our own experiences. What we perceive in others is not their individual history or the bonds that make them unique (their relationships, their friends, their parents, etc.), but rather what we have in common, i.e. the emotions we all feel: fear, joy, anxiety or sadness. In this sense, according to this reading of recognition, mimesis is an indispensable concept for understanding the characteristics of the human being.

5. *Positive empathy and negative empathy*

In the course of this investigation, it has become clear that empathy enables us to recognise objects by their qualitative aspects. In the analysis of the empathic relationship with other subjects, it emerged that the empathic mechanism works in the same way, but is characterised by a much greater activation power. In addition, in the case of the recognition of other subjects – as with objects, but to an even greater extent – the empathic relationship allows us to become aware of relevant aspects of ourselves. When the empathic act takes place, there is no identification of two actual selves, nor is there a superimposition of one self on the other, but only an *ideal* experience in which I feel the emotions of the other, using my own emotional chords as a means of understanding theirs.

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40   *Ibid.*, p. 699.

In this original and foundational dimension of the empathic relationship,[41] I know nothing about the other person, their affairs, their history and their desires, but our common humanity allows me to grasp the emotional experience expressed in their gesture: that emotion, which is precisely what we have in common, is then activated in me. The encounter with the other also allows me to grasp certain aspects of myself. However, this sort of 'self-activation' that makes us feel and understand the world as emotionally connoted – and that concerns everyone, both objects and subjects – is not always only positive. Sometimes the demand that comes from the world does not generate adherence but, on the contrary, rejection.

In general, as said, the instinctive and immediate nature of the empathic relationship should not be understood as a form of reasoning by analogy (in which I make an effort to understand how I would feel if I were in the other's place), but as something that often happens even unwillingly, or unknowingly. To take the example of the acrobat, I do not try to put myself in the place of the acrobat, on the contrary, by observing him, I instinctively and mechanically imitate his movements inwardly and unconsciously; his experience, which finds expression in his movements, becomes my experience: I feel his fear, dizziness, vertigo and emotion. I empathise with his movements, and the experience that is activated in me by looking at him is projected back onto him; but this is an instinctive activity that I do not engage in by choice: if I am at the circus and I am watching an acrobat, I cannot choose *not* to feel vertigo and dizziness, because the activation is unconscious and immediate.

But let us come to the point of interest here: the duplicity of empathy, its being both positive and negative. To explain this, I will use another Lippsian example, namely what happens when we see a laughing face. When we look at another person laughing, we feel a demand to feel that merriment in ourselves, and we are thus led to "act inwardly"[42] according to that demand. Again, it is a demand that acts on an instinctive and un-

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41   Of course, empathic experience cannot be limited to this instinctive, unconscious activation. Empathy must be thought of as structured in layers. The one in question is the original, foundational layer, in which the imitative dimension plays a fundamental role. This layer is followed by a more cognitive dimension in which the ability to integrate instinctive and immediate reactions with a knowledge of the context and the other's point of view allows a deeper and more articulate understanding of their condition. On this subject I refer readers to A. Donise, *Critica della ragione empatica. Fenomenologia dell'altruismo e della crudeltà*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2019.

42   Th. Lipps, *Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuss*, cit., p. 109.

conscious level.[43] When we look at another person's laughing face, it is instinctive for us to adopt an inner attitude of laughter, even without being fully aware of it.

This is the case of positive empathy, or more generally of empathy *tout court*, since when we speak of empathy we mostly refer to cases where the relationship is fluid and unhindered. But what happens if the laughter appears to me to be somewhat mocking? Or if the other person is arrogant or aggressive?[44] In this case I am unable to freely surrender to the demand coming from the other's face and experience an "obstacle or friction or inner dissonance".[45] The demand is the same, but I cannot smile or feel in harmony with the other. The friction generates displeasure: "the mockingly jubilant face is unpleasant to me and perhaps, deep down, repugnant to me".[46] This is a typical case of *negative empathy*: a feeling for the other to which I cannot spontaneously abandon myself, a feeling that does not give rise to the pleasure that comes from agreement, and which on the contrary gives me an unpleasant sensation.

Indeed, Lipps notes that in general the sensation of agreement in the face of demands from things and others generates pleasure; friction, on the other hand, generates conflict and therefore a feeling of displeasure. In the case of friction, the object's (or the observed subject's) demand acquires a particular meaning, because it becomes a "demand in the sense of a hostile request or of the introduction of something adverse into me",[47] of something that is directed against me.

The negative aspect of empathy should not be underestimated because it also explains the process of separation of the individual, which determines the constitution of individuality. It is the power of the negative, with its generation of friction, annoyance and displeasure, that allows us to distance ourselves from the other, first of all by defining the boundaries of our own self.[48]

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43   *Ibid.* Lipps comments: "nature, wise as she is, has everywhere taken control of what is most important for our existence: she has made it a matter of instinct, thus removing it from our discretion".

44   Th. Lipps, *Ästhetik. Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst*, vol. I: *Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, cit., p. 139.

45   Th. Lipps, *Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuss*, cit., p. 110.

46   *Ibid.*

47   *Ibid.*, p. 107.

48   This is not the place to outline this aspect of negative empathy, even though it is very relevant. I will limit myself to referring, in addition to the aforementioned Lipps, to M. Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, Transaction Publishers, London 2008.

So, empathy cannot be characterised in exclusively positive terms: our immediate relationship with the world can also be one of friction, horror and disgust. However, it must be clear that while empathy is a natural mechanism like instinct, the positivity or negativity that always characterises the empathic relationship is also linked to the cultural context, and therefore can be largely modified by experience and education. This dual connotation of negative empathy is relevant: on the one hand, it is a constitutive feeling of the human being, who will inevitably have unpleasant and 'disgusting' experiences in life, but on the other hand, the content of this disgust may partly vary according to the culture or values one grew up with. Although the capacity to feel horror and disgust is thus innate, it is only acquired and materialized over the course of life[49] and through socialisation.

6. *Recognition: between knowledge and practice*

Having clarified the characteristics of 'empathic recognition', we can try to take an initial stock of the journey so far. The recognition I have outlined in these pages is to be understood primarily as the capacity to grasp the world in its qualitative characteristics. It is a first form of recognition that, while immediately establishing a relationship of acceptance or rejection with the world (linked to pleasure or displeasure), precedes the question of the value or disvalue of what we have in front of us, but – this is what I intend to argue – constitutes its foundation.

Let me first clarify the empathic recognition of objects. I recognise animals, plants, works of art, and I can have an empathic relationship with them, which implies that I also feel and recognise their emotional qualities. Does this recognition necessarily imply a form of respect for these objects? Or, even better, does it imply that in recognising them I also evaluate them as worthy of being appreciated or preserved? Here, too, Lipps's analysis comes in handy because the judgement with which the subject recognises (*anerkennt*) the object, responding to its claim, has nothing to do with practical action or with the ethical dimension. In fact,

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49 As shown by numerous experiments and the direct experience of anyone dealing with young children, infants do not feel disgust for either insects or excrement until at least the age of two. Although disgust is innate, it is only acquired permanently in the first year of life Cf. Rozin et al. (eds.), *The child's conception of food: Differentiation of categories of rejected substances in the 16 month to 5 year range*, in "Appetite", 7, 2, 1986, pp. 141-151.

I can recognise the object's right to be characterised in a certain way, without this implying a positive evaluation, an interest or the need for a given action on my part. Considering an object as a bearer of value (*wer-thalten*), for example, merely means granting it the legitimacy of being considered as it is, but does not mean that I actually value it or evaluate it positively (*werten*).[50]

However, the same applies to other subjects: does empathising with another person immediately mean recognising them as a bearer of rights and dignity? Or is empathic recognition not sufficient in itself? To answer these questions we must make a distinction. Assuming that the dimension of empathic recognition is an essential part of the process that enables us to know the other, we must distinguish between the moment when we grasp the other with their qualities, finding them pleasant or unpleasant, attractive or disgusting, and the moment when we judge their value, recognising their dignity or not.

The first stage, i. e. the cognitive stage, of recognition, just as every form of sensory perception, is exposed to illusion. Just as a stick immersed in water appears broken to me even though it is not, or just as I might deceive myself about my own desires, so too empathy can lead me into error. Investigating the 'errors' or biases to which empathic recognition is exposed helps to outline some fundamental problems that arise in the transition from recognition as a cognitive relation to the world to recognition as an ethical and political dimension.

7. *Empathic errors 1: animism or anthropomorphism*

We must therefore ask ourselves whether empathy as a source of knowledge, and therefore as a capacity that enables us to recognise the emotional qualities of the world around us, is reliable. Does empathy give us a true picture of what is in front of us? Unfortunately, empathising with something and recognising it as real does not protect us from error; and, as Lipps explicitly argues, the only condition for talking about "authentic knowledge" and "truth" is a collaboration between the empathic and rational dimensions. Just like sensory perception or inner perception, empathy as a "source of knowledge" requires the scrutiny of reason, which can distinguish and effect the "separation between the

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50   Th. Lipps, *Vom Fühlen, Wollen und Denken. Versuch einer Theorie des Willens*. Zweite, völlig umgarbeitet Auflage, Leipzig 1907, p. 198.

'apparent' and the definitive real". This "scrutiny of reason" mainly concerns our relationship with things. In our relationship with objects we often fall victim to "empathic errors", which should be understood as errors of recognition: one of these is what we might call the "tendency towards animism", a conception that views all reality as animate and endowed with intentions.[51] Animism is nothing other than primal empathy uncorrected by reason: "a tree, a rock, a stream are thought of as volitional beings" even though, in fact, these objects "resist" the empathic activity that tends to animate them.[52]

This kind of error is more frequent in childhood, when rationality is not yet sufficiently developed, but it is also the root of most primitive cults. Within this type of error, however, we can include the tendency, found also in adults, to attribute human intentions and desires to animals or even objects. This same mechanism is evidently at work in the unreflective anger towards a malfunctioning household appliance. This kind of error is related to an overconfidence in empathic appearances leading to a recognition that is not sufficiently corrected by the experience and knowledge we have about these objects. In the event that I notice the error, the immediate impression may gradually be reduced to appearance. The correction, however, passes through other empathic acts, which are also subject to the scrutiny of reason. What I want to highlight here is that, for Lipps, we can speak of authentic knowledge only when we reflect on our cognitive and rational capacities that rework empathic knowledge.

In short, empathy is a valuable source of knowledge, but it can and must be corrected.[53] This correction is enacted by asking ourselves whether what we have felt through an empathic act, which purports to be immediately real, truly is so: is the poodle really happy to be wearing shoes or earrings? But it is also a question of thinking differently about the concept of reason,

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51   The concept of "intentional stance" proposed more recently by Daniel Dennett points at least partly in this direction. In his perspective, the intentional stance is a "strategy of interpreting the behavior of an entity (person, a animal, artifact, whatever) by treating it as if it were a rational agent who governed its 'choice' of 'action' by a 'consideration' of its 'beliefs' and 'desires'". Cf. D. Dennett, *Kinds of Minds*, New York, Basic Books 1996, p. 33.

52   Th. Lipps, *Erkenntnisquellen. Einfühlung*, cit., p. 237.

53   It is important to note that Lipps takes this concept of 'correction' from Hume, who, however, did not link it directly to the concept of reason, but to a broader prospective human capacity. Cf. D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, reprinted from the Original Edition in three volumes and edited, with an analytical index, by L.A. Selby-Bigge, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1896, p. 582.

because rationality also has empathy at its service, and not just the senses and the intellect. And emotional qualities are an integral part of how we know and recognise the world, as well as of our ability to distinguish true from false and right from wrong.[54]

8. *Empathic errors 2: Deanimation or dehumanisation*

At this point in the investigation, it would be very reassuring to be able to claim that the collaboration between the cognitive sphere and the emotional and empathic sphere protects us from further errors of recognition. Unfortunately, however, it is precisely in the cognitive dimension that the second error, specular and symmetrical to the first, creeps in. If as children we are more inclined to attribute human desires and intentions to animals, plants and objects, with time and experience, we learn not to trust what we feel. Phenomenologist Max Scheler said it with crystal clarity: our development passes through the ability to de-animate our surrounding world.[55] We learn to recognise that not everything around us is animated and connoted by anthropomorphic desires and intentions. This development, Lipps claimed, is an advancement of reason, since, as we have seen, "animistic consideration (…) is nothing more than primal empathy uncorrected by thought".[56] However, in the progressive de-animation in which we learn that objects do not have intentions of their own, there lurks a very dangerous pitfall: in learning from experience not to trust empathic appearances too much, we acquire the mechanism of de-animation. Knowing that a robot does not feel pain encourages us to ensure that "empathic recognition" – which still tends to be activated – does not determine our actions.

The de-animation process comes in different degrees and can become de-anthropomorphisation, pushing us to focus on differences instead of commonalities, for example in the case of our relationship with animals. Once learned, this mechanism knows no bounds and can also affect our relationship with other humans, prompting us to de-humanise the other

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54   From this perspective, the emotional and qualitative dimension of the world, together with everything that comes from the senses, is fully included among the elements that allow the intellect and reason to speak of knowledge. On this subject, I refer the reader to my *Critica della ragione empatica. Fenomenologia dell'altruismo e della crudeltà*, cit..

55   Cf. M. Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, Transaction Publishers, London 2008, p. 239.

56   Th. Lipps, *Erkenntnisquellen. Einfühlung*, cit., p. 237.

precisely based on elements that underline the difference between me and him or her or, better still, between 'us' and 'them'. Humans are very good at dehumanising other humans on the basis of somatic differences, such as gender or skin colour, but not only. When no firm somatic basis for distinction can be found, one introduces the lesser capacity for reasoning,[57] as in the case of slaves in ancient Greece. Indeed, history shows that differences creep into the most varied of things: the other may have different pain thresholds from ours, less capacity for feeling, or, as in the case of Jews, be attributed with a nature inclined to conspiracy and lust for power.

Difference is easily associated with distance: the other's diversity means that their pain and their dreams, although recognised empathically, are not recognised as a fundamental element of our deliberative process and are thus reduced to "empathic errors". We therefore become the victims of a sort of over-correction. In this way, the suffering of the other does not affect our actions because it is deemed only apparent, nor is it placed on the same level as our own. Corrections to empathic appearances can therefore be very dangerous if, together with difference, they end up conveying the idea that the other is somehow inferior.

9. *Conclusions*

Empathic recognition is an immediate and emotional relationship that directly involves the recognising subject: the emotional chords that are activated are our own, even if the score we are playing is the world around us.

As we have seen, precisely because our ego is an instrument for knowing the world, we are exposed to a double error: animism and dehumanisation. Both of these errors lead to a misrecognition of the other, i.e. they make us incapable of grasping their authentic nature, and the object of recognition is not always in a position to demand the correct recognition of its characteristics. As Fanon noted,[58] even when we speak of a confrontation between subjects, as in the case of the Hegelian "struggle for recognition", the clash is only possible when two identities are sufficiently developed to

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57   The Greeks considered slavery normal because they did not regard slaves as human beings on a par with themselves. Failing to identify a firm somatic basis for such a distinction, "the surest demarcation of the condition of the slave by nature seems to be the lack of logos, the language-reason". Cf. M. Vegetti, *Il coltello e lo stilo. Animali, schiavi, barbari donne, alle origini della razionalità scientifica,* Il Saggiatore, Milano 1979, p. 131.

58   F. Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Ed. Seuil, Paris 1952.

produce a conflict (which of course can then give rise to the subordination of the vanquished and the domination of the victor); but in the case of more vulnerable or less structured identities, there is no conflict, but rather the risk of misrecognition.

In the reading proposed so far, misrecognition arises primarily from an error in recognition: the other is either concealed by the identity of the recognising agent, or misrecognised through a "correction" that the latter operates based on previous cognitive (or ideological) elements. In his analyses, rather than underlining the moment of recognition behind the process of subjectification in the black-white relationship, Fanon highlights precisely the moment of misrecognition. In order to be appreciated, a black person must wear white masks, thus misrecognising their own identity, adapting to the agent's model and forgetting themselves.

Recognition of the other's qualities is exposed to errors and misunderstandings that open the door to misrecognition. Overcoming misrecognition is an arduous task that involves a significant cognitive effort on the part of the recognising subject: in some cases this process paves the way to conflict, in others to correction exercises that can take a long time. Recognising the world as emotionally connoted – despite being an integral and fundamental part of our knowledge – does not mean that we immediately know its deepest essence, nor does grasping its essence guarantee respect for it or the attribution of dignity to it.

Here, however, a conceptual distinction must be made between processes that require the recognition of the authentic characteristics of the recognised object and processes that require recognising the value of this object as positive (or negative). In the attempt to correct the errors of empathic recognition, conflicts or struggles may take place, collapsing these two moments to the point of making them barely distinguishable: through the struggle, the recognised object tries to impose on the recognising agent the need to correct any cognitive and empathic errors. The correction of these errors may allow the other to be grasped in their diversity, not misunderstanding their characteristics. But, at the same time, through the struggle, the object of recognition demands that its value be recognised. Of course, it is not automatic that the recognition of value takes place.

In other cases, the misrecognition of the other's qualities can generate exploitation and injustice without the object being able to make any claim, at least in the first person (this is the case with animals, the environment and everything that is not itself capable of recognition, including subjects who have lost this capacity, have not yet acquired it or never will). In these

cases, it is important to distinguish between the empathic and cognitive recognition that recognises the qualities of the 'object' in question and the value that one intends to attribute to this 'object'.

In conclusion, empathic recognition is of fundamental importance as a cognitive instrument of subjectivity, but not as an instrument of ethics. The emotional and evaluative dimension is indeed immediately present in our being in the world, but precisely because it is an instinctive element shaped by habit, we cannot rely on it as the exclusive basis of our judgement. Nevertheless, empathic recognition remains a decisive part of our knowledge and our capacity for deliberation.