



# Intercorporeity and the first-person plural in Merleau-Ponty

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## Abstract

A theory of the first-person plural occupies a unique place in philosophical investigations into intersubjectivity and social cognition. In order for the referent of the first-person plural—“the We”—to come into existence, it seems there must be a shared ground of communicative possibility, but this requires a non-circular explanation of how this ground could be shared in the absence of a pre-existing context of communicative conventions. Margaret Gilbert’s and John Searle’s theories of collective intentionality capture important aspects of the We, but fail to fully account for this shared ground of communicative possibility. This paper argues that Merleau-Ponty’s concept of intercorporeity helps reconcile the positive aspects of these accounts while also explaining how the genesis of the social world is continuous with perceptual life in general. This enables an account of the first-person plural as dependent on reciprocal communicative interaction (à la Gilbert) without the need to posit a primitive or primordial “we-mode” of consciousness (à la Searle). “Intercorporeity” designates a bodily openness to others that is not fundamentally different in kind from the general style of bodily comportment found in Merleau-Ponty’s rich analyses of perceptual life.

**Keywords** First-person plural · Collective intentionality · Intercorporeity · Merleau-Ponty · Social cognition · Communication

## 1 Introduction

There is more to social life than simply transcending one’s solipsistic sphere and recognizing that others exist. Beyond the mere ability to discern beings with minds and their expressive behavior, we are able to interact with them and form groups. In other words, beyond the ability of an *I* to recognize another *I*, it seems possible that individuals somehow enter into a relationship that can be referred to in the first-person plural—a *we*. Within the broad scope of investigations into intersubjectivity and

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social cognition, the nature of the referent of the first-person plural—hereafter, simply “the We”—occupies a unique place. For, on the one hand, it seems that to study our social existence, in its most basic form, we must begin with the question of how it is possible to transcend individual subjectivity. On this approach we start with the I and proceed outward, theorizing the conditions under which one can recognize or know another I. On the other hand, there is a sense in which sociality pervades nearly all aspects of life. This affords an approach that starts with the *social* (in some sufficiently broad sense) and works inward, theorizing the conditions under which individual mental life is constituted within a social context.

Investigating the nature of the We occupies a middle ground in this landscape, for it is plausible that the pervasive sense of sociality is not something innate, but rather something enculturated through a history of small-scale face-to-face interactions. In order for this enculturation to happen, however, the communicative activities that constitute these interactions must be possible on the basis of something prior to the form of sociality that grounds linguistic meaning. The constitution of the We, therefore, lies beyond our basic empathic capacities to recognize others and discern the minded from the non-minded, but prior to the pervasive and anonymous form of sociality that ripples throughout the human condition, grounding the intersubjective context of public meaning. Thus, in coming to understand the conditions in which the We obtains—i.e. the satisfaction conditions for the referent of the first-person plural—we are investigating the interface of the background capacities of sociality and what those capacities enable—the genesis of the social.

The nature of the We is central to the theory of collective intentionality. In the literature, two primary ways of understanding the We can be categorized around Margaret Gilbert’s holism, or “subject-based” account of collective intentionality, and John Searle’s adverbialism, or “mode-based” account.<sup>1</sup> Gilbertian holism is the view that collective intentional states—i.e., intentional states that could be ascribed in the first-person plural, such as “We are walking together,” or “We believe that justice is the advantage of the stronger”—have a *single* ontological bearer, or what Gilbert calls a “plural subject.” The plural subject, and thus the We, is the subject of collective states and obtains in virtue of how its constituent members become related to one another. Importantly, on Gilbert’s holism, there is a *single* collective intention, or We-intention, that obtains *of the whole*; there is not a collection of type-identical We-intentions borne in the minds of the constituent members. The latter is Searle’s view. Searle holds that collective intentions, and thus the We, come into existence in virtue of a collection of individuals all tokening type-identical mental states with the *sui generis* intentional form < we intend... >. Searle’s view is an “adverbialist” one in that the mental states at issue are *sui generis* in virtue of occurring in a unique “collective” or “plural” *mode*. They are not states “of us” in virtue of that at which they are directed (i.e., their “content” or “object”), nor in virtue of their ontological bearer (i.e., the “subject” of such states—this is Gilbert’s account). As Schmid puts

<sup>1</sup> Gilbert (1989, 2003, 2007); Searle (1990, 1995, 2010).

it, rather than occurring in the singular “I-ish” mode, these mental states occur in the plural “we-ish” mode; they are “ussy.”<sup>2</sup>

I further characterize Gilbertian holism and Searlian adverbialism as the two most promising approaches to understanding the nature of the We below (Sect. 2), but first (Sect. 1) I distinguish the We from other intersubjective phenomena and explicate three desiderata of an account of the We: plurality, awareness, and collectivity.<sup>3</sup> In a recent series of publications, Hans Bernhard Schmid has argued against Gilbertian holism and developed a new mode-based account, which depends on what he calls “pre-reflective plural self-awareness.”<sup>4</sup> In Sect. 3 I argue that Schmid’s account is promising, but that it ultimately encounters the same problem that he identifies with Gilbertian holism. Both of these positions actually hinge on a common issue: the possibility of communicative interaction in the absence of a pre-established intersubjective or collective context. In order for the We to come into existence, it seems there must be a shared ground of communicative possibility, but this requires explaining how this ground could be *shared* in the absence of a pre-existing We. In other words, if we come to share in the conventional norms characteristic of our intersubjective linguistic practices through a process of habitualization or enculturation, then there must be some more basic form of communicative interaction (or “proto-communicative” interaction) that facilitates this habitualization or enculturation process. This very problem was central to Merleau-Ponty’s considerations of intersubjectivity and the problem of other minds. In Sects. 4, 5 I explicate Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “intercorporeity” in the context of this contemporary debate and develop a positive account of the We that reconciles Gilbertian holism with Searlian adverbialism. The idea is that the We is grounded in a basic form of communication that is possible in virtue of bodily interaction. The form of sociality achieved in the We is continuous with the general form perceptual life that Merleau-Ponty analyzes as a bodily-openness to the world.

## 2 Desiderata of an account of the We

In seeking to understand the nature of the We, we must begin by distinguishing it from related social phenomena. The classic problem of other minds concerns the conditions for the possibility of recognizing or having knowledge of mental life beyond our own. The “conceptual” problem of other minds concerns the very possibility of applying mental predicates to others given that one’s understanding of those predicates is based on a first-personal acquaintance with one’s private mental life. The “epistemological” problem of other minds concerns the forms of justification for our beliefs regarding mental states besides our own.<sup>5</sup> In the phenomenological

<sup>2</sup> Schmid (2014, p. 12).

<sup>3</sup> I draw on Mathiesen (2005) in explicating these criteria.

<sup>4</sup> Schmid (2009, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> On the conceptual problem, see Avramides (2001) and Davidson (2001). On the epistemological problem, see Hyslop (2016) for a comprehensive history and overview.

tradition, these kinds of questions are grouped under investigations into the nature of *empathy*, which here we may roughly define as the form of experience that presents us with others as expressive beings with minds of their own.<sup>6</sup> These principles have to do with the unique ways that the movement of embodied subjects manifests as *expressive*.<sup>7</sup>

While empathy is the form of experience whereby we directly encounter others—the *I-Thou* relation—there is a more pervasive form of sociality that does not require the presence of others. This is the *anonymous* sociality that characterizes one's experience of the world as a world that is not just one's own. Perceptual experience includes a sense that what one sees is *public*. The actions that I undertake in completing daily mundane tasks are performed in a *typical* style, are done “as *one* does.” The artifacts I see all around me only make sense as things that were made and could be used by others. The words I use to express myself presuppose a shared ground of meaning. Heidegger is well known for his characterization of this pervasive and anonymous form of sociality. The kind of being that we enjoy is one that is “always-already” social. In Heidegger's terminology, *being-with-others* (or simply “*being-with*”) is an existential structure of *being-in-the-world*, which is the kind of existence humans enjoy as *Dasein*.<sup>8</sup>

Phenomena referred to in the first-person plural, however, cannot be fully understood in terms of empathic awareness or the anonymous sociality of Heideggerian *being-with*. There is something more, something distinctive, meant by “we” in the full-fledged sense of the term. I distinguish the “full-fledged” use of “we” here to distinguish the target phenomenon from other uses of the first-person plural.<sup>9</sup> Oftentimes one speaks of a We in the sense of multiple individuals who have both seen or done something, but not necessarily together. For example, one might say “We went to the concert” and simply mean “I went to the concert and she went to the concert.” But something different is meant when one says “We went to the concert” and means “We went to the concert *together*.” Furthermore, there are cases when one says things like “We are especially susceptible to skin cancer” (suppose this is a pale-skinned individual). In such cases one speaks as a member of a *set* or *class* of individuals united only by their having a common property. This is not a case of the We in the full-fledged sense that I am targeting.

Mathiesen (2005) offers three necessary and jointly sufficient conditions, for what she calls “collective consciousness,” that I adopt here to distinguish the target phenomenon: *plurality*, *awareness*, and *collectivity*. On the plurality condition, the referent of the first-person plural may be thought of as a single entity in some sense, but necessitates that there be an underlying plurality of individuals that remain distinct. In other words, whatever kind of entity the We is, we cannot think of it as an

<sup>6</sup> See Gallagher and Zahavi (2008, ch. 9).

<sup>7</sup> Walsh (2014)

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger (1962, pp. 149ff.). See Koo (2015) and Zahavi (2019) for discussion.

<sup>9</sup> See Gilbert (1989, p. 178) on the distinction between the “full-blooded” sense of “we” that I explicate here, and the “initiatory” sense of “we” present in phrases such as “Shall we dance?” Throughout the paper I am using “full-fledged” rather than Gilbert's “full-blooded.”

“enlarged I,” as some kind of super-agent into whom the distinctiveness of its constituent members are wholly subsumed.<sup>10</sup>

On the awareness condition, the constituent members of the We must be conscious. I leave the degree to which this condition requires a form of explicit self-awareness open. For now, it will suffice to say that this condition is meant to rule out cases of purely functional integration. For example, in times of scarcity, slime mold band together to form a spore tower that ensures the propagation of the species.<sup>11</sup> I do not consider this slime mold cooperative to be a We in any substantial sense. Robots on an assembly line are functionally integrated and could be said to collectively realize a single token goal-directed state, but I do not take this to be a case of the first-person plural either. To say “we,” after all, is a form of self-reference and philosophers from both analytic and continental traditions should at least find it *prima facie* plausible that self-reference depends on consciousness in some manner.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, the collectivity condition concerns whatever it is that constitutes the “togetherness” of the We. The We exists in virtue of a plurality of self-aware individuals being *bound up* with one another in some way. As mentioned above, there is no We in the full-fledged sense when an aggregate of individuals is simply physically co-present or members of a certain demographic classification. What constitutes this “togetherness” that binds a plurality of self-aware individuals into a full-fledged We has been the subject of several (by now) canonical accounts of collective intentionality in the analytic tradition, and recently the subject of a robust renewal of interest in the phenomenological tradition.<sup>13</sup> One candidate for satisfying the collectivity condition could be a distinctive ontological structuring of the constituent members of the We, explicable in terms of part-whole or dependence relations. Another candidate could be a unique phenomenology of the constituent members. Or, it could be some combination of these, whereby the ontology of the We and the phenomenology of the constituent members stand in some sort of dependence relation. The latter is Merleau-Ponty’s conception of intercorporeity, laid out below in Sects. 4, 5.

The joint sufficiency of the plurality, awareness, and collectivity conditions can be further understood by spelling out how insufficient combinations of them yield groupings that diverge from the target phenomenon. For example, a case of plurality + awareness does not yield a full-fledged We because it allows for mere sets or

<sup>10</sup> Zahavi (2019, p. 255).

<sup>11</sup> Ismael (2011).

<sup>12</sup> As Mathiesen (2005) notes, the awareness condition is meant to preserve a notion of intentionality that is inextricably linked to having a conscious perspective on the world, as opposed to the “as-if” intentionality that we may ascribe to systems that appear to exhibit goal-directed behavior (e.g., streams “want” to flow downhill). The idea that consciousness is essential to intentionality arguably goes back to Brentano (1874), and has been prominently defended by Smith (1986) and, more recently, Kriegel (2009).

<sup>13</sup> Canonical analytic accounts include Bratman (1992, 1993, 2014), Searle (1990, 1995, 2010), Tuomela (2007, 2013), Gilbert (1989, 2014), Rovane (1998), Pettit and List (2011), and Pettit (1993). For an overview of recent work in the phenomenological tradition, see Szanto and Moran (2015) and Salice and Schmid (2016).

aggregates of individuals who are not sufficiently bound up with one another. As I type this sentence in a noisy café full of patrons absorbed in their laptops, I might say “We are all here working,” but this does not capture anything beyond what could be referred to by saying “I am here working and she is here working and he is here working...” and so on. The constituent members of the referent of “we” in this case only share in something in a “distributive” sense of sharing rather than the collective sense.<sup>14</sup>

A case of plurality + collectivity does not suffice since it allows for purely functional integrations, such as the slime mold cooperative or the robot assembly line mentioned above. In this sort of case there is a plurality of individuals who remain ontologically distinct, and their behavior is collective in that it is tightly bound up with the behavior of others, such that their individual behavior only makes sense when understood as part of a collective aim or purpose. But if the constituents of a group are not phenomenally conscious then it does not make sense to speak of this as a *first-person* plural situation. We might be able to speak of what “they” are doing, but this is to impose unity on a plurality from without, whereas the unity of the full-fledged We is endogenous in virtue of its first-personal character.

Furthermore, a case of awareness + collectivity does not amount to a full-fledged We either since it allows for a singular “hive mind” scenario. Consider the Borg from *Star Trek*. The Borg are a species of organic-mechanical hybrids powered by a singular consciousness. When one of them speaks it says “We are Borg...,” but there is no plurality of conscious minds, only a single unified consciousness operative across multiple Borg bodies. The We may very well include some sort of “fusion,” but if there is no possibility for *disintegration* then this is not really a first-person plural phenomenon. A “hive mind” scenario is no We at all, but rather an enlarged I.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the phenomenon I am referring to as the full-fledged We is distinct from the many more robust social phenomena discussed in the social ontology literature. Helm’s (2008) notion of a *plural agent* is a collective entity that emerges and endures in virtue of stable long-term patterns of rational behavior. Plural agency is likely a necessary condition for many important social phenomena, including political groups. But plural agency depends on the more basic phenomenon of the We under investigation here. In order for a plural agent to establish enduring patterns of rational behavior, a We must first come into existence.

### 3 Locating the we conceptually and genetically

Explaining how the We comes into being involves a conceptual question and a genetic question. The conceptual question is the question of how to analyze, or “conceptually locate,” the collectivity that makes collective intentional states properly collective. When we analyze what makes the human heart the kind of thing that it is, we isolate its functional properties—that it pumps blood—when conceptually

<sup>14</sup> Schmid (2014, p. 11).

locating its identifying features. Likewise, if we are to give an analysis of first-person plural phenomena, which properties of the phenomena are we isolating when we identify what makes them phenomena of that kind? The genetic question is the question of how a plurality of individuals transforms into a We. How we explain the genesis of the We—i.e., the transition from individuals to collective—will hinge on where we conceptually locate the collectivity of collective intentional states.

The literature on collective intentionality and the nature of the We can be aptly summarized as a debate on where to “‘tie in,’ as it were, the ‘jointness’ in collective engagements”<sup>15</sup>—i.e., the collectivity that transforms a mere plurality of individuals into a We. The landscape of possible positions that has emerged from this literature can be divided according to where one attempts to conceptually locate the collectivity of the We. Schmid provides a useful taxonomy.<sup>16</sup> If collective intentional states are “had” by a We in some sense, then an explication of the collectivity condition can proceed by analyzing the nature of the intentionality of these states. Intentional states are *had* by a *subject* in a certain *mode* and have *content* (or, an “object”) in virtue of their being directed at or about something. For example, the subject of the intentional state <I saw the butterfly> is the individual who is the *bearer* of the state, and the content (object) is “the butterfly.” Think of the mode of this intentional state as an adverbial modification of the entire mental state <see the butterfly>. This state is in the I-mode; not only is it ontologically borne by the individual who is the referent of “I,” but it is experienced in the I-mode in that the butterfly is disclosed to the subject of the experience in a certain way. In other words, subjects do not just *bear* experiences, they *have* or *suffer* them. Accordingly, we can conceptually locate the collectivity constitutive of the We within some aspect of its possible collective intentional states.

A content-based explication of the collectivity condition makes the We part of the intentional content or object of the individual mental activity of the constituent members. On Bratman’s account, for example, a We is formed in virtue of a plurality of individuals each entertaining an intentional state of the form <I intend that we *f*> in conditions of common knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Notice that on this account the mode of the mental activity grounding the We is *singular*—in the I-mode—and collectivity enters the picture as part of the intentional content or object. This makes the We reducible to an integration of I-mode intentional states directed at their collective state. Both subject-based explications and mode-based explications, on the other hand, treat the collectivity constitutive of the We as irreducible in some manner. A subject-based account locates collectivity in the *bearer* of the collective intentional state. Collective intentional states are not borne in the individual minds that constitute the collective. Rather the We itself is a “plural subject” that tokens a single collective state.<sup>18</sup> A mode-based account locates collectivity in the individual minds of the constituent members, but not in the manner of the content-based

<sup>15</sup> Szanto and Moran (2015, p. 5).

<sup>16</sup> Schmid (2014).

<sup>17</sup> Bratman (1993).

<sup>18</sup> Gilbert (1989).

account. On this account a collective intentional state obtains in virtue of the constituent members of the group each individually tokening mental states in the “we-mode.”<sup>19</sup> These intentional states borne in the minds of individuals that are “we-ish” or “ussy”<sup>20</sup>; rather than being formally rendered  $\langle I \text{ intend that we } f \rangle$  as in the content-based account, they would be rendered  $\langle I \text{ we-intend that we } f \rangle$ .<sup>21</sup>

The remainder of this paper will focus on interrelated issues pertaining to the subject-based and mode-based explications of the collectivity condition. Content-based accounts à la Bratman seem more apt for characterizing more sophisticated forms of collective intentionality involving future-directed rational deliberation and conscious planning.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Bratman’s account allows for a We to come into existence too easily.<sup>23</sup> For on any formulation that locates the We in the intentional content of the singular intentional states of individuals, a We may come into existence simply in virtue of a plurality of individuals believing themselves to be part of a We.

This leaves the subject-based and mode-based explications of the collectivity constitutive of the We, and as I will argue in the following sections, these two types of account actually hinge on a common issue: the possibility of communicative interaction in the absence of a pre-established intersubjective or collective context. In the remainder of this section I will briefly review the key features and challenges of subject-based accounts and mode-based accounts. This review will establish the dialectic in which Schmid’s recent account is situated. Schmid’s account is promising, I argue, but ultimately leads to the fundamental problem of communication that Merleau-Ponty encounters in his considerations of intersubjectivity.

### 3.1 Gilbertian holism

Subject-based accounts locate the collectivity of the We in a specific ontological structuring of its constituent members such that the constituted whole is the unique bearer of any possible collective intentional states. On Gilbert’s account, the We is a “plural subject” that bears collective intentional states, or “We-intentions.” Thus, the collective intentional states that could be ascribed with expressions such as “We are going for a walk” or “We are watching a film” are not realized in any one individual mind. The We itself, the entire group, is the bearer of a single We-intention.

The problem for any subject-based account is explaining the genesis of the We. The We has to come into existence, somehow, on the basis of the activity of individuals. On Gilbert’s account, a We is formed on the basis of a *joint commitment*. Joint commitments are enacted when individuals openly manifest their readiness to engage in a common enterprise in conditions of common knowledge.<sup>24</sup> We do not

<sup>19</sup> Searle (1990, 1995, 2010); Tuomela (2007, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Schmid (2014).

<sup>21</sup> Szanto (2016, p. 155).

<sup>22</sup> Pacherie (2012, p. 166).

<sup>23</sup> Schmid (2014, p. 10).

<sup>24</sup> Gilbert (1989, pp. 198 ff.; 2014, pp. 1–22).



need to go into the technical details of Gilbert's account here. The important point is that for any subject-based explication of the collectivity condition there needs to be an account of what exactly must take place in order to transition from a plurality of co-present individuals to a unified plural subject. Beyond being able to recognize and become aware of one another, the individuals must somehow engage one another such that a unified entity forms. This form of engagement need not be linguistic, as an exchange of glances or other communicative gestures may suffice for reciprocal communicative interaction, which Gilbert calls "mutual recognition" and deems to be the minimal conditions for We-hood to obtain.<sup>25</sup>

As Gilbert admits, however, the possibility of a communicative exchange (however brief and minimal) seems to presuppose something already common to the individuals involved. In order for an expressive behavior to be *communicative* there needs to be the possibility of its *uptake*—i.e., not only must someone mean something *by* it, but it must mean something *for* someone else. For this to be possible there must be some (however minimal) shared context of meaning. But if communicative actions require a shared context of meaning, then this shared context must first be established. Schmid claims that this ultimately makes Gilbert's account subject to an infinite regress: "[F]or every plural subject, there has to be another plural subject that is the subject of the attitude by which the former is created, and the sense of 'us' would have to be a sense of an infinite number of 'usses,' as it were."<sup>26</sup> Thus, the challenge for Gilbert, and any subject-based explication of the collectivity condition in general, is to explain how communicative action is possible in the absence of an already established We. There needs to be a pre-existing form of collectivity to ground the possibility of the communicative interaction that generates the We, but this pre-existent ground needs be possible in the absence of the form of collectivity that comes to bind the We. Alternatively, the communicative interactions that generate the We must somehow be possible in the absence of a shared ground or framework.

### 3.2 Searlian adverbialism

Rather than locating the collectivity constitutive of the We in the ontological structuring of its constituent members, mode-based accounts locate it in the mental activity of the individual minds of the constituent members. On Searle's now canonical account, for example, we-intentionality is a *sui generis* mode of conscious mental activity, distinct from intentionality in the I-mode. Collective intentional states ascribed through phrases such as "We are going for a walk" or "We are watching a film" are borne as we-intentions in the minds of the individual constituent members, not as a single token state of the entire group as in Gilbert's account. Searle asserts that the we-mode of mental activity is *primitive*, a necessary background condition for social phenomena. As many have pointed out, however, the problem with

<sup>25</sup> Gilbert (1989, p. 218; 2014, pp. 324–340).

<sup>26</sup> Schmid (2014, p. 5).

Searle's account is that it would seem that in order for an individual to entertain we-mode intentional states, she must take herself to be part of a We. But if she must take herself to be part of a We in order to entertain we-mode intentional states, then this We would need to come into existence on the basis of something other than the activation of a plurality of individuals' we-mode intentional states.<sup>27</sup>

Schmid's account of "pre-reflective plural self awareness" is promising precisely because it seems to avoid the pitfalls of Gilbert's and Searle's accounts.<sup>28</sup> Claiming that a subject-based account à la Gilbert requires a pre-existent shared ground of meaning to enable communicative interaction, Schmid posits a primitive we-mode of consciousness à la Searle. The infinite regress he finds plaguing the subject-based account is avoided because the shared communicative ground always-already exists in the form of a primitive we-mode. But unlike Searle's account, Schmid's we-mode is not only primitive, it is *primordial*. That is, not only do individuals entertain intentional states that are "ussy," but this first-person plural form of experience is in fact *more basic* than the first-person singular mode of experience. The first-person singular mode of subjectivity, on Schmid's account, is actually a developmental achievement genetically posterior to pre-reflective plural self-awareness—the "I-ish" form of experience only develops subsequent to and on the basis of the "we-ish" form of experience.

Schmid's proposal is fascinating, but risks losing sight of the target phenomenon. It helps solve the problem of a subject-based account because now the possibility of communicative interaction between individuals is built into the most basic form of subjectivity. Individuals in a primitive and primordial "ussy" mode of subjectivity experience their intentional states as already belonging to a We, and thus there is no need to establish a shared context of meaning prior to any communicative activity. But in making the we-mode the primordial mode of human life, Schmid's account threatens to stretch the notion of the We too thin. As some have recently objected, the We is a peculiar achievement based on communicative interactivity, and "isn't simply a synonym for any kind of social relatedness whatsoever."<sup>29</sup> In other words, if an account of the We makes it too automatic, too easy so to speak, it risks relaxing the collectivity condition to such an extent that the We is no longer the full-fledged We but rather the general anonymous sociality that characterizes so many aspects of human life that are completely devoid of interpersonal interaction.

Even Schmid seems to recognize as much, as he admits that there is something uniquely important about the form of communicative interaction that Gilbert makes constitutive of the We. Even if there is a primitive and primordial form of We-consciousness that serves as the always-already shared phenomenological frame of first-person plural phenomena, surely something changes when a plurality of individuals begins interacting. While first-person self-awareness is plausibly ontologically grounded in the brain, given the plurality condition, the "ontological substratum" of the We necessarily differs from that of the I: "Social facts and social relations are

<sup>27</sup> Gilbert (2007), Hornsby (1997), Pacherie (2012), Zaibert (2003).

<sup>28</sup> Schmid (2014).

<sup>29</sup> Brinck et al. (2017, p. 137).

real, too, but they are real in a sense that is considerably different from the type of reality of the brain; *they seem to exist only in virtue of interaction* and do not provide such a base of similar stability and permanence as the brain.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, I find Schmid’s account helpful in highlighting that there needs to be *some* common framework from which the communicative interaction that constitutes the full-fledged We arises. But an account of the We need not make this condition of possibility of first-person plural phenomena something already in a “we-mode.”

In the remainder of the paper I will focus on Merleau-Ponty’s considerations of intersubjectivity and his notion of “intercorporeity.” As one might expect, Merleau-Ponty’s engagement with these issues revolves around his understanding of our bodily nature. His concept of intercorporeity offers a way to simultaneously maintain what is promising about Schmid’s notion of plural pre-reflective self-awareness as well as the peculiarity of the We as an *achievement* of intersubjective life rather than a *given*. The account that I will develop differs from Schmid’s adverbialism, however, in that the form of experience that grounds the possibility of the communicative interactions that generate the We is not a *sui generis* collective or plural mode of intentionality. On the contrary, we do not need to posit a primitive and primordial we-mode in order to explain the genesis of first-person plural phenomena. Rather, on the account developed here, first-person plural phenomena are continuous with the intentional mode of perceptual life in general.

Importantly, the notion of “perceptual life” at issue in this discussion must be distinguished from the model of perceptual intentionality common to many discussions in philosophy of mind and phenomenology. Perceptual intentionality, in these discussions, has a subject-object structure, and can be individuated into distinct perceptual “acts” or mental “states” with discrete “contents.”<sup>31</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of perception—or, “perceptual life” as I am using the term—is essentially a kind of bodily “being-toward,” constituted by interaction with an environment. Merleau-Ponty characterizes perceptual life as “anonymous” and “pre-personal,” but scholars disagree about the precise meaning of these characterizations and their relevance for his discussions of intersubjectivity. In the following sections I will address this issue and develop the connection between perceptual life and the genesis of the first-person plural in Merleau-Ponty, with particular attention to both his *Phenomenology of Perception (PhP)* and his Sorbonne lectures from 1949 to 1952, *Child Psychology and Pedagogy (CPP)*.

#### 4 Merleau-Ponty on the body and intersubjectivity

The chapter *Others and the Human World* in *PhP* treats a nest of issues related to intersubjectivity. The question at hand is whether Merleau-Ponty gives us unique resources for dealing with the We. He begins by noting the pervasiveness of

<sup>30</sup> Schmid (2014, p. 22, my emphasis).

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., the earlier “static” phenomenology of Husserl (2001, 2014) or the account of perception in Searle (1983).

being-with, our always-already social existence. The artifacts of the cultural world reveal “the near presence of others under a veil of anonymity” (*PhP* 363/405).<sup>32</sup> He proceeds to wonder, however, how this general and anonymous sociality arises at all, in a manner reminiscent of the contemporary conceptual problem of other minds: “How can a human action or thought be grasped in the mode of the ‘one,’ given that it is, in principle, a first person operation and inseparable from an I?” (*PhP* 363–364/405). Following Husserl, Merleau-Ponty’s account of intersubjectivity is intertwined with his account of the body. Both of these phenomenologists described a sense in which there is an “intersubjectivity of the body.” Merleau-Ponty’s later concepts of “reversibility” and “flesh” build on Husserl’s analyses of auto-affection in *Ideas II*. If I touch my right arm with my left hand I am simultaneously aware of my body as both touching and touched, as both sensing and sensed. This form of self-awareness discloses the body as simultaneously subject and object. It is a “sensuous intertwining” that characterizes our bodily being-in-the world and thus gives us a place to start on intersubjectivity: “What we have said about the body provides the beginnings of a solution to this problem [of intersubjectivity]” (*PhP* 364/406).

In his first pass at how this works, Merleau-Ponty tells a developmental story of direct “resonance” or “mirroring,” similar to some contemporary discussions of mirror-neuron research<sup>33</sup>:

A fifteen-month-old baby opens his mouth when I playfully take one of his fingers in my mouth and pretend to bite it. And yet, he has hardly even seen his face in a mirror and his teeth do not resemble mine. His own mouth and teeth such as he senses them from within are immediately for him the instruments for biting, and my jaw such as he sees it from the outside is for him immediately capable of the same intentions. “Biting” immediately has an intersubjective signification for him. He perceives his intentions in his body, perceives my body with his own, and thereby *perceives my intentions in his body*. (*PhP* 368/409, my emphasis)

Furthermore, in watching others manipulate utensils, the infant’s “body schema assures the *immediate correspondence* of what he sees done and what he does” (*PhP* 370/412, my emphasis). This “resonance” account can also be found in the chapter *The Body as Expression and Speech*:

Communication or the understanding of gestures is achieved through the reciprocity between my intentions and the other person’s gestures, and between my gestures and the intentions which can be read in the other person’s behavior. *Everything happens as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body, or as if my intentions inhabited his body*. (*PhP* 190–191/225, my emphasis)

Any explication of intersubjectivity in terms of “resonance” or “mirroring,” however, runs the risk of failing to respect the constitutive asymmetry between self-awareness and other-awareness. In other words, if the mental states of others are

<sup>32</sup> References to Merleau-Ponty’s works are formatted English/French pagination.

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., Goldman and Gallese (1998) and Gallese (2001, 2003, 2005).

only recognizable and accessible by means of direct resonance or mirroring, then that would mean I have to literally undergo what you are experiencing, perhaps in a diminished form, in order to understand it. I would have to feel a bit of sadness in order to recognize the distress in your frown and a bit of joy to recognize the happiness of your smile.<sup>34</sup> Interpersonal understanding would thereby be reduced to a kind of contagion. Merleau-Ponty recognizes the inadequacy of such an account, wondering, “But is it really the other that we reach in this way?” When we make interpersonal understanding into an “an experience-shared-by-many, we introduce the impersonal into the center of subjectivity, and we erase the individuality of perspectives—but, in this general conflation, have we not caused the alter Ego to disappear along with the Ego?” (*PhP* 372/413). Furthermore, an undifferentiated token experience in which multiple subjects share risks rendering the very notion of communication incoherent: “The self, who is the witness of every actual communication, and without which the communication would be unaware of itself and thus would not be communication at all, seems to prevent any resolution of the problem of others. Here we see a lived solipsism that cannot be transcended” (*PhP* 374/415). Resonance accounts fail to recognize that there is some “permanent” truth to solipsism (*PhP* 374/415).

*Others and the Human World* thus seems to recognize a kind of bodily connectiveness between self and other that grants a direct and immediate form of communication while simultaneously recognizing the potential for such an account to efface the necessary distinctiveness that maintains the plurality condition outlined above. In a few other passages, however, Merleau-Ponty seems to offer a different account of how self and other become related to one another, which I will refer to as the “systemic whole account.” Although it is difficult to discern Merleau-Ponty’s precise meaning, the following two passages are suggestive and seem to bear on the issues outlined in the previous section:

There is, between my consciousness and my body such as I live it, and between this phenomenal body and the other person’s phenomenal body such as I see it from the outside, *an internal relation that makes the other person appear as the completion of the system* [l’achèvement du système]. Others can be evident because I am not transparent for myself, and because my subjectivity draws its body along behind itself. (*PhP* 368/410, my emphasis)

I experience my body as the power for certain behaviors and for a certain world, and I am only given to myself as a certain hold upon the world. Now, it is precisely my body that perceives the other’s body and finds there something of a miraculous extension of its own intentions, a familiar manner of handling the world. Henceforth, *just as the parts of my body together form a system, the other’s body and my own are a single whole, two sides of a single phenomenon*, and the anonymous existence, of which my body is continuously the trace, henceforth inhabits these two bodies simultaneously. (*PhP* 370/411, my emphasis)

<sup>34</sup> Overgaard (2005), Zahavi and Overgaard (2012), Zahavi (2011).

In both of these passages Merleau-Ponty shifts from speaking of a relation between self and other to a relation between a self and the collective—from an I-Thou relation to an I-We relation. The relation is characterized in terms of part to whole, or component to system. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty immediately connects both of these part-whole characterizations to our lived bodily experience. This part-whole relation is something that is *lived through* or *experienced* and not just a brute functional structure. This characterization of a plurality of bodies interacting as a systemic whole provides an early articulation of Merleau-Ponty's notion of intercorporeity, which describes a kind of fundamental openness of the body to other bodies such that their *coupling* generates norms that come to affectively govern their engagement.

Clarifying the nature of this “system” to which self and other belong will require a more detailed discussion of how both perceptual life and intercorporeal interaction are forms of “coupling,” which I will elaborate on in the next section. Some initial clarification can be found in two passages from *CPP*. First, in another characterization of this intercorporeal “system,” Merleau-Ponty specifies that he sees his own account as simpler and more coherent than the account of intersubjective relations provided by classical psychology:

By reforming the concept of the psyche in replacing it with the concept of behavior, and the conception of cenesthesia being replaced by that of postural schema, the problem of the consciousness of the other can be resolved.

We thus have a system in two terms: my behavior and the other's behavior that constitute a totality. (*CPP* 247/311).

Understanding others is thus not a matter of two isolated consciousnesses (“psyches”) projecting or analogically transferring internal bodily sensations (“cenesthesia”). One's awareness of her own body is not primarily “a mass of strictly individual sensations,” but rather “a system, a schema that carries the relationship to the position of my body in the ambient environment [...] an object organized by relationship to its surroundings” (*CPP* 247/311).

Note that here and in the passage cited above (*PhP* 370/411) the notion of behavior is always defined as a relation between the body and the environment or world. One experiences her own body as a power for *certain* behavior, a *certain* world, or as a *certain* hold upon the world. The body is always oriented in relation to its surroundings. The “world” or “environment” that orients and thus situates the body is not “the whole world” or some “general” world. The world or environment in which the body is behaviorally situated can only be one's immediate surroundings, one's concrete situation. Merleau-Ponty's notion of behavior *indexes* the body to its surroundings. Thus, when he characterizes the intercorporeal self-other system as a totality of behavior we must understand this to necessarily include the immediately surrounding environment. In other words, if the intercorporeal self-other system is understood as the interlocking of behavior, and behavior is necessarily indexed to a concrete situation, then we must understand the former as something that is also necessarily indexed to the immediate context in which it arises. After a discussion of Husserl and Scheler on intersubjectivity, Merleau-Ponty insists on this point:

We must render the self as interdependent in certain *situations*. We must tie even the notion of ipseity to that of situations; the ego would be defined as identical to the act in which it projects itself. Self and other—we are conscious of one and the other in a common situation. It is this sense that we must make more precise in Scheler's conceptions and in Husserl's notion of "pairing." It is about encountering the same orientation. But, at the same time, there is only a possibility of comprehension in the *present* (a kind of geometrical place of self and other) and in an *assignable* reality. (*CPP* 32/45)

## 5 From perceptual to intercorporeal coupling

Merleau-Ponty's concept of intercorporeity preserves the necessary distinctiveness of individuals demanded by the plurality condition but grants a fundamental openness and connectedness to others required for reciprocal communicative action in the absence of a preexisting We. In *The Body as Expression and Speech*, Merleau-Ponty makes it clear that communication grounds the shared context of linguistic meaning, and not vice versa: "the communication between consciousnesses is not grounded upon the shared sense of their experiences, rather it grounds them in turn" (*PhP* 191/226). But linguistic communication is a convention, and "conventions are a recent mode of relation" that "presuppose an earlier means of communication, and language must be put back into this communicative current" (*PhP* 193/227).

This "earlier communicative current" is established on the basis of a pre-reflective bodily encounter with others that Merleau-Ponty, following Husserl, refers to as "coupling." The term "coupling" is "anything but a metaphor," Merleau-Ponty tells us (*PrP* 118/24). The direct encounter of my body and the body of the other results "in a sort of action which pairs [my body and the body of the other]" (*PrP* 118/24).<sup>35</sup> Several contemporary versions of "interaction" and "enactive" theories of intersubjectivity and social cognition in philosophy of mind and cognitive science cite Merleau-Ponty's discussion of intercorporeity and this notion of coupling as a precursor.<sup>36</sup> Citing the same Merleau-Ponty passage on the "completion of the system" above, Gallagher explicates the concept of intercorporeity as follows:

[I]ntercorporeity signifies the way that we are *dynamically coupled* to the other person in our intersubjective interactions... We understand others through embodied anticipatory processes that are either fulfilled or quickly corrected,

<sup>35</sup> These two passages (as well as two more below) on coupling and pairing come from the version of Merleau-Ponty's 1950–1951 lecture 'The Child's Relation with Others' translated by William Cobb and appearing in *The Primacy of Perception (PrP)* edited by James Edie. This version draws on the 1960 edition of the lecture published by the Centre de Documentation Universitaire, whereas the version translated by Talia Welsh in *CPP*, which I am otherwise citing, comes from the 2001 edition published by Editions Verdier, and differs slightly. See Welsh's "Translator's Introduction" (*CPP* ix).

<sup>36</sup> Gallagher (2011, 2016); De Jaegher (2008), De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007), Fuchs and De Jaegher (2009).

or that in some cases lead to a breakdown in the interaction that would then need to be restored.<sup>37</sup>

What Gallagher here refers to as “dynamic coupling” needs further explication. The process of dynamic coupling, I argue, is constitutive of the We on Merleau-Ponty’s systemic whole account. But in order to understand this process we must first understand the sense in which our *individual bodies* already are “systems” for Merleau-Ponty, as noted in the second systemic whole account passage cited above (*PhP* 370/411). As Gallagher notes, but does not explain, “*our systems* enter into a coupling that advances toward a completion. On a dynamic model, the *two systems* form a new system or a new form.”<sup>38</sup> As will become clear, Merleau-Ponty’s systemic whole account of the We is continuous with his general account of perceptual life. Both describe processes whereby a subject becomes coupled with its environment (broadly construed) in a unique part-whole relation that Merleau-Ponty understands as “form.”

### 5.1 Perceptual coupling

Merleau-Ponty originally analyzed the concept of form in his early work, *The Structure of Behavior* (*SB*). The concept continues to play a role throughout the rest of his corpus, and is defined in terms of part-whole relations within the interplay of a system.<sup>39</sup> “We will say that there is form whenever the properties of a system are modified by every change brought about in a single one of its parts and, on the contrary, are conserved when they all change while maintaining the same relationship among themselves” (*SB* 47/49). The notion of form is “essentially dynamic” (*PrP* 121/27). Furthermore, “to say that phenomenon is one of ‘form’ ... is to say that it develops according to a law of *internal equilibrium*, as if by *auto-organization*” (*PrP* 121/26). While it is tempting to use “form” and “system” interchangeably, this is not entirely accurate, although they are closely related. Merleau-Ponty repeatedly analyzes perceptual experience using both notions in *PhP*. Strictly speaking, the body is a “system” and “form” emerges through the body’s perceptual engagement with a “field” or “milieu, which yields a stable perceptual world. The body is “a system of motor powers or perceptual powers...that moves toward its equilibrium” (*PhP* 155/190). It is “not just a sum of juxtaposed organs, but a synergetic system of which all of the functions are taken up and tied together in the general movement of being in the world” (*PhP* 243/280–281). Perceptual life is an ongoing active process of “movement” that engages a “field” and thereby brings stable unities (objects) into relief: “I perceive a thing because I have a field of existence and because each phenomenon polarizes my entire body, as a system of perceptual powers, toward it” (*PhP* 332/373).

<sup>37</sup> Gallagher (2016, p. 168, my emphasis).

<sup>38</sup> Gallagher (2016, p. 169, my emphasis).

<sup>39</sup> See Muller (2017) and Sheredos (2017) for recent explications of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of form, how he adapted it from the Gestalt psychologists, and its role in his overall philosophy.



This way of analyzing perception should sound familiar to those acquainted with contemporary “enactive” theories of perception, which, generally speaking, construe perceptual life in terms of the active coupling of an organism with an environment.<sup>40</sup> On this view, organism “couples” with world through an active, norm-governed, and temporally extended process. The organism finds itself as a *pole* or *point of orientation* within a phenomenal field. The field is an *ambiguous milieu*, but not an utterly amorphous given. The field is given to the subject as a structured network of *solicitations* that *motivate* the continuous active perceptual engagement of the subject. An organism couples with its perceptual field insofar as it brings objects into stable relief through its activity. Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of depth perception provides a clear articulation of this overall picture. Seeing objects as a certain size and at a certain distance from oneself requires specific acts, namely retinal focusing (and oftentimes micro-adjustments of head and torso position). Prior to or in the absence of these forms of perceptual activity there are only ambiguous phenomena that have yet to be brought into relief. Bringing perceptual phenomena into relief yield *objects*, characterized by their unitary and temporally stable appearance.

Importantly, this perceptual activity that takes up the phenomenal field in order to yield unitary stable objects arrayed at specific distances and depths is *norm-governed*. The normativity that governs this behavior is experienced as a kind of felt affective motivational force that guides our perceptual engagement toward a “maximal grip” or “perceptual optimum” such that we are “geared in” to the perceptual situation.<sup>41</sup> In a vivid example, Merleau-Ponty describes the way an organist becomes accustomed to an unfamiliar organ. The organist does not form a new set of representations or memorize where the stops and pedals reside in “objective space”; rather, the organist “sizes up the instrument with his body” such that they “together form a system” whereby its various components “are only presented to him as powers of such and such an emotional or musical value, and their position as those places through which this value appears in the world” (*PhP* 146–147/181). Here we see how the norms governing the organist’s movements are projected onto the perceptual situation by his intentions or interests: “the subject’s intentions are immediately reflected in the perceptual field: they polarize it, put their stamp on it” (*PhP* 133/164–165).

The dynamic interplay of perceptual life is a process by which body becomes *anchored* to the world (*PhP* 146/180, 261/298). Even in very basic examples of making sensory contact with the world, Merleau-Ponty resists any view whereby a perceiver passively receives independent sensory “contents.” Perceptual experiences of constant, unitary, stable entities emerge from a dynamic that Merleau-Ponty likens to the interplay of question and response. The visual thing or tactile thing exist as “that which is met with or taken up by our gaze or by our movement, a question to which they respond precisely” (*PhP* 331/373). The body not only takes up the world and projects meaning onto it (as in the organist example), but finds itself invaded by

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., Varela et al. (1991), O’Regan and Nöe (2001), Nöe (2004), Thompson (2007).

<sup>41</sup> See Dreyfus (2002) and Kelly (2005) for analyses of the nature and significance of this “felt normativity” in Merleau-Ponty’s account of perception.

it and receptive to it. It is precisely in its sensitivity—or, *specific manners of being susceptible* to the world—that Merleau-Ponty locates the “pre-personal” or “anonymous” bodily existence of perceptual life: “The counterpart of the natural world is the given, general, and pre-personal existence in me of my sensory functions, which is where we discovered the definition of the body” (*PhP* 345/387).

## 5.2 Intercorporeal coupling and syncretic sociability

Recall that the systemic-whole account of the We under consideration here is characterized by what Gallagher refers to as the “dynamic coupling” of intercorporeity. We have just seen how perceptual life is a kind of dynamic coupling of body and world, and how this is rooted in the pre-personal or anonymous being-toward-the-world of the body. Prior to explicit visual or tactile identification of objects there is an anonymous “intersensorial experience of the world where objects are experienced synesthetically.”<sup>42</sup> As Whitney emphasizes, this anonymous synesthetic immersion is shot through with affective force and includes an indistinct mixture of exteroception and interoception.<sup>43</sup> This characterization shows how the anonymity of perceptual life is also key to understanding the basis of intersubjectivity. “The indistinction of self and other is for Merleau-Ponty a corollary of this indistinction of interoception and exteroception.”<sup>44</sup> Just as the anonymity underlying perceptual life is a kind of sensitivity and adherence to the “inter-sensory unity” of things (*PhP* 248), it is also a direct experiential openness to the other, specifically the body of the other.

Merleau-Ponty understood this primary “openness and lack of barriers” in terms of the notion of *syncretic sociability* discussed by several theorists of his era, namely Henri Wallon.<sup>45</sup> “Syncretic sociability” refers to an initial stage of child development in which “the infant, due to an inability to organize her perceptual and tactile world, confuses herself with others.”<sup>46</sup> Merleau-Ponty describes this as “a kind of precommunication, an anonymous collectivity with differentiation, a kind of group existence” (*CPP* 248/312). Given this description in terms of “collectivity,” it is tempting to interpret Merleau-Ponty’s notion of syncretic sociability and the anonymous form of experience underlying it similarly to Schmid’s notion of pre-reflective plural self-awareness. I argue that this would be mistaken.

At times Merleau-Ponty does seem to understand the anonymity of syncretic sociability in terms that suggest something like a primordial we-mode of experience. Indeed, this seems to be how Welsh has understood the notion (at least at times).<sup>47</sup> On her reading, this stage is “characterized by experiences that appear to emanate from a *shared* rather than an individuated experience,” or, a “kind of

<sup>42</sup> Welsh (2014, p. 68).

<sup>43</sup> Whitney (2012, pp. 190–191).

<sup>44</sup> Whitney (2012, p. 191). See also Welsh (2014, p. 47).

<sup>45</sup> Welsh (2014, p. 45); *CPP* (248/312).

<sup>46</sup> Welsh (2014, p. 47).

<sup>47</sup> Welsh (2014).

asubjective immersion in a shared life.”<sup>48</sup> But the contrast of an experiential mode that is “shared” with one that is “individuated” is problematic both conceptually and as a reading of Merleau-Ponty. Conceptually, if anonymity is understood as a shared form of experience in contrast with an individuated one, this suggests a form of “fusion” or “pooling” of consciousnesses. Following Stawarska, this is to understand syncretic sociability as a form of “indistinction,” or a “dilation” of what nonetheless remains “a subjective and solipsist viewpoint.”<sup>49</sup> On such a reading:

The passage from the egocentric to intersubjective stage can only be thought of as a gradual trimming [...] Such trimming would not introduce the category of otherness into the infant’s compact world. It seems therefore that the theory of indistinction does not alone predict or facilitate the possibility of experiencing selves whose bodies and sensibilities are discontinuous with one’s own (however closely knit self and other might be) and so cannot provide a precursor of relations to others.<sup>50</sup>

I concur with Stawarska that the anonymity-as-indistinction construal ultimately maintains a subjectivist and solipsistic flavor and thus is unable to truly theorize the *sociality* of syncretic sociability. Unlike Stawarska, who nonetheless maintains that this *is* Merleau-Ponty’s view (and thus that his view is problematic), I do not think this is the best reading.

As a reading of Merleau-Ponty, the characterization of the anonymity underlying syncretic sociability as a we-mode or an experiential mode lacking individuation is strained. I concur with Welsh’s characterization of syncretic sociability as an “asubjective intersubjectivity” given that anonymity is pre-personal and prior to any sort of experiential modality that includes a sense of ownership or mineness.<sup>51</sup> The problem, however, lies in thinking of the asubjective anonymous layer of our existence as a lack of individuation. Welsh cites Merleau-Ponty’s description of “an anonymous collectivity...a kind of group existence” (*CPP* 248/312).<sup>52</sup> The full passage, however, reads: “An anonymous collectivity *with differentiation*, a kind of group existence” (my emphasis). This is a key omission. There is still some sort of individuation of consciousness, even at this anonymous pre-personal level. I suggest that this form of individuation is just the individuation of bearers of phenomenally conscious experience. The infant may experience the cries of others as part of its own life somehow, but the infant is not experiencing the cries of others in the same way the others who are crying are. Merleau-Ponty indeed suggests that a great deal of experience is open to others, and perhaps even its most significant aspects, but not experience in its totality:

But the purely sensible aspect of a feeling constitutes only a minor portion of it. All the rest, its content, its *intention*, can be shared with others. Thus, in a

<sup>48</sup> Welsh (2014, pp. 52–53, 60).

<sup>49</sup> Stawarska (2003, p. 304).

<sup>50</sup> Stawarska (2003, p. 304).

<sup>51</sup> Welsh (2014, p. 47).

<sup>52</sup> Welsh (2014, p. 49).

fire, only the burnt subject can feel the sensible sharpness of pain. But everything else the burn represents, danger of fire, danger to the body's integrity, *the meaning of pain*, can be communicated to others and is felt by them. Thus, it is the same form, the same content of the sentiment that is lived in another manner. The signification, the sentiment's intention (what constitutes its essentials) is parallel for two consciousnesses. There is an isolation of the sensed, but not of consciousnesses. (*CPP* 31/43)

Clearly Merleau-Ponty takes *phenomenal* consciousness to be individuated on the basis of bodily bearers of experience. When he speaks of "consciousness" not being isolated, he means what we might now understand as the manifest intentionality of intelligible behavior.

To be fair, Merleau-Ponty is not always consistent in his descriptions. Elsewhere he says that "The child is radically altruistic and individualistic at the same time, because of this lack of differentiation with regard to others. In fact, it would be better to say that the child is neither truly altruistic nor truly individualistic for precisely this reason" (*CPP* 427/530). I think the best way to interpret his overall position on the matter is to construe the lack of differentiation to mean that the anonymous pre-personal layer of existence lacks any *experiential* sense of self, first-personal "mine-ness," or "for-me-ness."<sup>53</sup> This is a claim about the *how* of experience, or the *way in which* experiences are experienced. The bearers of phenomenally conscious experience, however, are individuated simply in virtue of being distinct creatures with distinct bodies and nervous systems.

In reading Merleau-Ponty's notion of syncretic sociability this way, I am still sympathetic to the overall thrust of the indistinction view—for example, Whitney's claims about the indistinction found in childhood perception involving a kind of "affective intimacy" with others and the environment.<sup>54</sup> I am simply arguing that this affective force must still be localized somehow. There must be a bearer of the affective feelings, a feeler of the feelings. This is not a claim about *how* those feelings are experienced; the mimetic infant may be experiencing these affects without any intero/exteroceptive boundary, without any *character* of mineness, without any sort of *experiential* self-other distinction; but these affects are not free-floating. They are felt by some being, some feeler of feelings. This is simply a claim about the necessary ontology that falls out of such phenomenological descriptions. My reading is thus more akin to Heinämaa's, who argues that by anonymity "Merleau-Ponty means neither self-less experience, nor any experience with a general or collective subject fusing together personal selves."<sup>55</sup> On her reading, Merleau-Ponty's concept of anonymity is meant to express that in our perceptual being-toward, one takes up the world "not according to *my* habits or *my* will, but according to the [sensible]

<sup>53</sup> This is a significant thesis in its own right, that cannot be defended or refuted here, given arguments from Zahavi (1999, 2005, 2014) that phenomenal consciousness *entails* an essential experiential sense of self, or "for-me-ness."

<sup>54</sup> Whitney (2012, p. 203).

<sup>55</sup> Heinämaa (2015, p. 125).

thing” itself.<sup>56</sup> Likewise, in the intercorporeal case, my being-toward the other is guided by the way the bodily behavior of the other solicits or frustrates my own (and vice versa). I become coupled to the other through the affectively charged dynamic interplay of an interlocking system of bodily behavior, not on the basis perceptual recognition of the other *as* other or *as* some sort of unique perceptual object.

The intercorporeal coupling that I am characterizing as constitutive of Merleau-Ponty’s systemic whole account is thus not prior to or different in kind from the general bodily being-toward constitutive of perceptual life.<sup>57</sup> There is simply a general *style* of being-toward that aims at becoming normatively anchored to the world, at achieving the dynamic equilibrium of *form*. Upon being thrown into the world only with this general openness that seeks to become normatively anchored, an organism will find its articulatory activity beholden to different varieties of responsiveness. What ends up differentiating perceptual from intercorporeal coupling is the different systemic wholes that emerge and, importantly, the habitualized bodily routines that sediment therefrom. Thus, we do not need to posit a primitive and primordial always-already *plural* or *collective* or *shared* modality of experience in order to ground the We.

## 6 Habit and normativity in perception and sociality

Schmid’s notion of pre-reflective plural self-awareness is promising insofar as it provides a shared common ground from which first-person plural phenomena arise. This solves the problem of how the kinds of communicative interactions that seem common to collective activities are possible in the first place: we already experience our mental lives as shared with others, and so communicating with them operates on the basis of this shared experiential ground. If our primitive and primordial form of intentionality is one in which we do not experience our own mental lives as differentiated from those of others, then engaging in collective activities is simply a continuation of our natural state. So, Schmid can admit, Gilbert is largely right about the importance of reciprocal communicative interaction in explaining the genesis of the We. But in order for these communicative interactions to take place at all, there must be a general and pervasive We of which we are all a part, and this, it turns out, is simply our individual minds’ standard operating system: the “ussy” mode of experience.

The view described here as Merleau-Ponty’s systemic whole account agrees with Schmid in that there must be some experiential ground or framework in order for reciprocal communicative interaction—and thus the full-fledged We—to arise, but sharply differs in that it does not consider this experiential ground to be a primitive

<sup>56</sup> Heinämaa (2015, p. 132).

<sup>57</sup> It may be the case that intercorporeal coupling is developmentally prior to the sort of body-world coupling of perceptual life since intercorporeal coupling is already occurring between fetal and maternal bodies prior to birth (Lymer 2010). Even if this is the case, however, I would still characterize this in terms of the body’s general style of being-toward involving a reciprocal dynamic interplay.

and primordial we-mode of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty's systemic whole account of the first-person plural is not an account of an undifferentiated token state, experiential resonance, or mental contagion. It is continuous with his analysis of the anonymous bodily being-toward from which perceptual life also emerges. In perceptual experience the body and the world form a systemic whole. This whole is the total intentional state that, upon reflection, we would use to individuate the parts that jointly enact it. In other words, if we want to individuate a specific sequence of bodily movements as "grasping the doorknob" we necessarily include the doorknob in our description. Isolating a particular sequence of movement under an intentional description is only possible if we include the *telos* of the movement in the description. The kinds of moves that constitute our perceptual coupling with the world become sedimented into regular habits—certain routines, certain typical manners of dealing with the world. The body becomes habituated through the repetition that one should expect from repeatedly dealing with the environment one inhabits. We all develop a habitual *style* for engaging our world—for orienting oneself in order to grasp something, in order to get a clear look at something, etc. As Wehrle puts it, "On a concrete level, we can understand the experiencing body itself as 'normative,' in that it generates norms through repeated actions and interactions, crystallizing into habits."<sup>58</sup>

These habitualized routines of the normative body characterize the body's general *openness* to the world. The body *incorporates* the moves and routines that the environment affords.<sup>59</sup> The world solicits certain moves, and through these moves the subject brings stable perceptual objects into relief. These perceptual routines, like focusing one's eyes or adjusting one's head, become so automatic precisely because their frequency and reliability. The body becomes normatively anchored to a world through the reciprocal interplay of its own being-toward (including its morphology, drives, interests, and projects) and the way the world shows up and responds to its moves. Intercorporeal coupling is characterized by the same structure of bodily openness and habitual incorporation. The normativity that emerges through intercorporeal coupling routines, however, includes a different perhaps more precarious dynamism and normativity. In encountering others, a *We* is generated when a systemic whole emerges and achieves a stable form, just as in the body-world systemic whole achieved in the perceptual case. When we ascribe a collective intentional state, such as "We are walking together," we are individuating a sequence or set of moves by the constituent members that jointly enact that state. The kinds of moves that come to count as communicative actions are those habitual routines that crystallize in virtue of the pre-existing socio-cultural environment and what it affords.

The *We* is achieved, therefore, in a similar manner to perceptual objectivity: reciprocal interaction that normatively situates the body in a (perceptual, intersubjective) world. The normativity governing the moves that sustain an intercorporeal system are continuously renewed in a dynamic negotiation. Perhaps an apt image would be the awkward dance that ensues when two people find themselves walking

<sup>58</sup> Wehrle (2017, p. 325).

<sup>59</sup> See Zeiler (2013) on bodily incorporation and excorporation.

toward one another along the same path. Just as one of them veers to the right to avoid the other, the other veers left and they end up on a collision course once more. And so they both adjust course once more, this time veering left and right respectively, only to remain on a collision course. Eventually their respective motor-intentions “interlock” in such a way that one of them remains to the right and the other remains to the left and they pass by one another smoothly. There is a We here, however brief and ephemeral, that arises in virtue of a mutually recognized plan to coordinate action. The intercorporeal system that dynamically arises and stabilizes here, however briefly, could be individuated under the collective intentional description “We are passing by one another” or “We are avoiding one another.”

This example helps illustrate a larger point about our bodily openness and incorporation of habits. In the case of our basic perceptual routines, these may require conscious effort in their earliest forms, but they quickly recede into the background of awareness and become automatic. This liberates us from our environment and enables us to not only take it up, but to reflect upon it, to think about it. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

Thus, by renouncing a part of his spontaneity, by engaging in the world through stable organs and preestablished circuits, man can acquire the mental and practical space that will free him, in principle, from his milieu and thereby allow him *to see it*. (*PhP* 89/117)

The same is true in the intercorporeal case, and this insight is the essence of the phenomenologically inspired sociology of later theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu’s notion of the *habitus* is essentially the sedimented set of bodily habits that crystallize through the repetition of typical social interactions.<sup>60</sup> These habits have the same liberating effect as our perceptual habits (one does not have to consciously attend to which hand to extend in greeting, or how long to maintain eye contact while nodding and smiling while passing an acquaintance in the hallway). In the social case, however, it is easier to see how the normative force that these habits come to exert on our lives are tied to institutionalized disciplinary structures. Norms of gender and sexual orientation, for example, get reinforced and enforced through the repetition (and occasional breakdown) of specific intercorporeal coupling routines.<sup>61</sup> The systemic whole account of the We, and the habitualizing tendencies of the normative body on which it depends, need not be a utopian vision of collectivity achieving something “higher”; it also is the mechanism of inscribing disciplinary norms and constraining individuality.

<sup>60</sup> Bourdieu (1990).

<sup>61</sup> See Wehrle (2017) for a comprehensive discussion of habits and normativity in the phenomenological as well as post-structural traditions.



## 7 Conclusion

Recall the three conditions, introduced in Sect. 2, that must be met in order for the referent of the first-person plural, the “full-fledged” We, to obtain: plurality, awareness, and collectivity. The systemic whole account of the We defended here meets all three conditions. The plurality condition is met because the distinctiveness of the constituent members is maintained. In cases of intercorporeal coupling that stabilize into first-person plural phenomena, we do not have an undifferentiated singular token intentional state. As discussed above, although the anonymity characterizing the bodily openness of syncretic sociability may not include an experiential self-other distinction or felt sense of mineness, Merleau-Ponty still characterizes phenomenal consciousness as differentiated on the basis of its bearers being distinct beings. We can individuate the whole system with a singular token intentional state in the first-person plural form, but in doing so the plurality of the constituent members is maintained as the plurality of dependent parts of an emergent, systemic whole. An affectively felt normative force governs and sustains their intercorporeal engagement, and is therefore individualized to each constituent member. They are not, and could not be, in type-identical intentional states even through their overall systemic interaction can be individuated by a token intentional state ascription.

Satisfying the awareness condition has already been implicated in how the plurality condition is met. The integration of the plurality is not a blind mechanistic functional integration. The constituent members being phenomenally conscious is a necessary condition for the unity-in-plurality that binds them. The affectively felt normativity that guides and regulates their integration can only be operative in phenomenally conscious subjects. This normative force creates a feeling of being *beholden* to something in the constituent members.

“Becoming beholden” is an apt characterization of the phenomenology of collective intentionality, and therefore of We-membership. The “beholdeness” of this characterization need not take the form of reflective awareness of adhering to or deviating from a norm. The beholdness at issue is more basic, obtaining in virtue of felt bodily affect that regulates our interactions. This phenomenology depends on the ontological structure described in Merleau-Ponty’s notions of system and form. In intercorporeal coupling, constituent members become beholden to something greater than themselves: the overall system or form that makes sense of their behavior, that gives their individual moves a *collective* sense or aim. The collectivity of the We is the normativity that comes to regulate the behavior of the constituent members and is dynamically generated by their sustained interaction. This helps us understand how the natural world and social world are continuous yet distinct. The social world emerges in virtue of the same general bodily being-toward through which the natural world emerges for us in perceptual experience. In perception we become normatively anchored to the natural world, beholden to its structure. The same is true of the social world, but experience teaches us that in the social case not only does the world sometimes violate our expectations, but sometimes we violate its expectations. The habitualized routines that



it affords provide it with stability, but are also open to continuous negotiation, modification, and disturbances of our own making. Becoming beholden to the social world is a function of our general bodily openness and, in an important sense, is imposed on us and beyond our power. But *what* we become beholden to is not fixed. As opposed to the natural world, it is much more of an open question, something of our own making—that is, much more a matter of what *we* take ourselves to be doing.

## Abbreviations

- SB* Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1963. *The Structure of Behavior*. Translated by Alden Fischer. Pittsburgh: Dusquene University Press. *Structure du Comportment*. 1942. Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France
- PhP* Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2012. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald Landes. New York: Routledge. *Phénoménologie de la perception*. 1945. Paris: Gallimard
- PrP* Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1964. *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*. Edited by James Edie. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. *Les relations avec autrui chez l'enfant*. 1960. Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire
- CPP* Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2010. *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures 1949–1952*. Translated by Talia Welsh. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. *Psychologie et pédagogie de l'enfant: Cours de Sorbonne 1949–1952*. 2001. Paris: Editions Verdier

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