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Inter-affectivity and social coupling: on contextualized empathy

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Abstract
Recent enactive approach to social cognition stresses the indispensability of social affordance with regard to social understanding and contends that it is affordance that primarily solicits one's reaction to the other, such that one becomes affected by the other and attends to the other's situated appearance in the first place. What remains to be explored, however, is the sense in which social affordance is delineated by an affective sphere and the extent to which the affective sphere serves as a meaning constraint for social sense-making. In this paper, we analyze Husserl's genetic theory of affection, so as to better understand the nature of the social affective sphere. And we argue that social understanding takes places at different levels and it is at the passive and pre-reflective level that the social surroundings are pre-delineated by a sort of affective ambience where the empathizer and the empathizee come into contact. Once this is appreciated, we can better articulate the affective structure of social affordance and its meaning constituents. And we show that, at the passive level, social coupling is in nature an affective intertwinement between oneself and the other and it consists of a particular kind of corporeal intentionality with which one adverts to the other's presence and responds to the other's appeal.

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1 Introduction

In recent research on social cognition, enactivists hold that our primary access to others' mental states is by means of an enactive interaction, rather than involving a primarily cognitive process, such as theorization or simulation (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007; Gallagher, 2004, 2009, 2013; Colombetti & Torrance, 2009; Fuchs & Koch, 2014). They argue that in real-life social interaction we do not start as a disinterested spectator and observe other people's behavior from a third person perspective so as to interpret their behavior in terms of mental states. On the contrary, they argue that social interaction is from the outset embedded in a certain context and that our access to others' mental life is primarily informed by the context in question. It is in interaction or participatory sense-making that we come to understand how the other feels or thinks, without the need to appeal to deliberate inference or simulation (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007; Gallagher, 2009; Gallagher & Varga, 2014; Ratcliffe, 2017).

A critical aspect of the enactive approach consists in its emphasis on the indispensability of social affordance with regard to empathic understanding. That is, social surroundings primarily afford appropriate opportunities for interacting with others, thereby prescribing the way in which we understand them (Bruttomesso, 2016). It is social affordance that prompts or solicits our responses and reactions to the other in the first place, such that we can become affected by the other's salient appearance within a context, come to comprehend the meaning of the other's behavior, or even communicate with the other in a pragmatically fluent manner (see, e.g., Colombetti, 2017; Fuchs & De Jaegher, 2009; Gallagher & Varga, 2014).

In this paper, we will further explore two related issues: (1) in what sense social affordance is delineated by an affective ambience; and (2) to what extent the affective ambience constrains the sense-making of the other's situated appearance. In contrast to De Jaegher & Di Paolo (2007) and Colombetti (2017), who take social interaction to be an active participation among interactors and affection to be a feature attached to social interaction, we argue that social interaction takes place at different levels, and it is at the passive and pre-reflective level that social surroundings are already pre-delineated by a sort of affective ambience where the empathizer and the empathizee come into contact, thereby setting a meaning context for the encounter. And in light of Husserl's genetic theory of affection, we can further determine the nature of affective affordance, so as to articulate the affective topology of social affordance and its meaning constituents. By doing so, we show that the surrounding world as an affective sphere of valued objects fundamentally prescribes the way in which we relate ourselves to other people.

In the next section, we outline the enactive view of empathy, with an emphasis on the point that empathy is primarily informed and constrained by social affordance and that it is initially motivated by an inter-affective relation between the empathizer and the empathizee. In Sect. 3, we articulate Husserl's analysis of affection and demonstrate how the other's situated emergence elicits advertence and a primitive form of social coupling, so as to highlight the significance of situational life-world and the dyadic relation of social encounter. In Sect. 4, we

examine De Jeagher and Di Paolo's as well as Colombetti's characterization of affection, and we specify two intrinsic features of affective coupling, namely that it is in nature a pre-thematic, pre-reflective way of relating to other people and that it consists of a particular bodily intentionality. Before concluding, we argue that the surrounding world as a constant background factor has always already informed interpersonal understanding in an implicit way.

2 Enactivism and social understanding

In their pioneering paper "Participatory sense-making: an enactive approach to social cognition" (2007), De Jaegher and Di Paolo propose that, in contrast to mainstream theories of mind-reading that take social understanding to be a process of figuring out how the other feels, thinks and believes by means of detached observation (p. 495, 499), social interaction should be conceived as an autonomous process where the interaction itself takes on meaning and structure. In concrete face-to-face encounters, we are engaged with others in specific situations and interact with them through embodied coping, thereby understanding their feelings, intentions as well as their orientation and perspective toward the world. The situatedness of social engagement thus already establishes a network of meaning and reference that pervasively informs and facilitates ongoing social interactions. That is to say, social understanding should first and foremost be conceived as a form of "dyadic interaction" (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007, p. 486), wherein the empathizer and the empathizee smoothly participate with and affect each other to the extent that the dynamic interaction as such becomes a process of sense-making.

One crucial implication of this enactive approach is that, our primary access to other people's mental states such as thought, belief, intention as well as disposition is by no means a process of deliberate mentalization from a non-interested point of view (ibid.; Gallagher, 2009). As Zahavi (2011, p. 552) once suggested, the first and indispensable step of appreciating the nature of social cognition is to highlight the basic character of the face-to-face encounter and recognize it as a paradigmatic case of social understanding as we live with other people. It might be true that we at times need to rely on established psychological knowledge in order to explain others' behavior and decipher their motivations, thereby cognitively ascribing to them certain mental states. But we should not overestimate the sophistication of social understanding and overlook the very fact that we encounter other people within a pragmatically meaningful context that has already informed us about others. For instance, upon seeing someone approaching me and stretching her right hand, I immediately see that she is greeting me and inviting me to shake her hand. That is, social encounters are carried out within a specific situation that is inherently articulated by a web of meaning. And it is through this web of meaning that we live with other people in the first place (Heidegger 1996, pp. 81–82). Hence, as opposed to mainstream theories of mind-reading that emphasize capacities of putting oneself into others' mental shoes, a phenomenological analysis of social understanding will contend that our understanding of other people is fundamentally embedded in a social environment (see Zahavi, 2007, 2011; Gallagher, 2009).

In this context, we can see more clearly the significance of social affordance with regard to empathic understanding. On Gibson's classical definition (2015), the environment we live in is not homogeneous or neutral in meaning; rather, it is an ecological niche where we primarily project ourselves toward the world, interact with it, and make sense of it. The surrounding world thus understood affords a set of different possibilities for actions, e.g., a chair affords a possibility of being sat upon for human beings, whereas it might afford to be place to hide for little insects. In a similar vein, social surroundings are not merely a place where interpersonal interaction unfolds but, more importantly, they essentially prefigure and shape a possible course of interaction (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007, p. 486). On the one hand, social surroundings are already pervasively infused with cultural, historical as well as pragmatic valences that implicitly structure and enrich our understanding of the situation wherein encounters take place (Gallagher, 2013, p. 5; see also Di Paolo, Rohde, M & De Jaegher (2010) for a further discussion of the relation between value and social interaction). It is against this social backdrop that we come to see others as someone passing-by, or as someone who we have a close relationship with, e.g., a colleague, a friend or a family member (see Held, 1972, p. 46; Husserl, 1989, p. 192). The fact that we watch a pedestrian somehow uninterestedly, step into a room full of familiar faces, or come across someone we recently had a quarrel with, already delineates a sort of ambience that significantly impacts our implicit attitude toward other people, be it feeling relaxed or uneasy, awkward or indifferent. Hence, social context is itself a pragmatic context that contains a network of significance and reference, wherein we come to encounter other people in the first place (Kiverstein, 2015). Or in Gibsonian terms, social context constitutes a sort of lively niche that scaffolds social activities in such a way that it has already laid out a set of possible interpretations.

On the other hand, as De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007) emphasize, the enactive approach takes interaction to be a radical point of departure (see also Gallagher & Hutto, 2008; Gallagher, 2009). This is not as trivial as to say that we communicate and interact with other people in social life; rather, the point is that social interaction is in essence a process of dyadic coordination in and through which individuals engage with each other, thereby allowing a dynamic unfolding of social interaction. Hence, when it comes to a concrete social encounter, we inherently live through this dyadic relationship and take a second-person perspective upon people who we enact or can enact (further) actions with. On this account, when I see someone stretching her right hand during a meeting, I do not see it as a series of physiological movements that remain to be deciphered, as if they were a composition of meaningless visual data. On the contrary, I immediately see it as an invitational action that I shall respond to—an action that affords a contextualized opportunity such that I can immediately recognize the intention embodied in her action and pragmatically cope with this opportunity by, say, stretching my own hand. The way we understand and respond to the other is initially motivated or solicited by what the other's behavior affords for interaction, such that we may either comply with the handshaking implied in the stretching-out of a hand or avoid it all together. Hence, the simple fact that someone stretches out a hand has already re-oriented my perspective upon the surroundings and drawn my attention toward this particular action (see Sartre, 2003, p. 279; Bower & Gallagher 2013, p. 123). The other's action has so dramatically

altered the affective contour of the context that I can't help paying heed to it. As Gallagher and Varga (2014, pp. 189–190) put it,

> [t]he intentions that I can see in your movements appear to me as logically or semantically continuous with my own, or discontinuous, in support or in opposition to my task, as encouraging or discouraging, as having potential for (further) interaction or as something I want to turn and walk away from.

It follows from the above observation that social understanding is at bottom confined by a social context and colored by certain affective states (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007; Bower & Gallagher, 2013; Gallagher, 2017; Colombetti, 2017; Fuchs & Koch, 2014). As Ratcliffe (2005) shows, our existential relation with the world in general and other people in particular is determined by "existential feelings" that passively run in the background of our social engagements, pre-figuring a field of possible actions that we can comport ourselves toward the surrounding world with, and delimiting a sort of ambience wherein we come to cope with the surrounding world and other people. On this view, a basic form of social understanding simply consists in an underlying layer of experience, wherein we are solicited to act upon the surrounding world, rather than actively making use of conscious deliberation and cognizing it in the first place. More precisely, the surrounding world is by no means a mere aggregate of objects, nor is our engagement with these objects of equal interest or attentiveness. As Kiverstein (2015) shows, social interaction is affectively motivated by the other's situated affordances such that the other's presence primes the empathizer to recognize the other's perspective upon the surrounding world, and it is only subsequently that one can put oneself into the other's "mental shoes". As he illustrates, when we see someone in pain or at risk, the very perception "exerts a powerful pull" on our attentional capacities (p. 7), such that we are immediately drawn to the situational context where the other's gesture, expression and behavior take form. Thanks to this lively context, we can without further ado comprehend the meaning of the other's bodily gestures—e.g., it is a painful cry that calls for or even urges immediate responses. In face-to-face encounters, the unfolding context suffices for a preliminary understanding and there is little need to actively exploit one's imaginative capacities so as to recreate in oneself what the other would feel, think or believe. To paraphrase Kiverstein (2015, p. 5), the lively context offers a set of possible actions such that we are motivated to re-orient our perspective upon the world in a way that allows us to pick up the other's intention in the first place.

At this point, we can see that social understanding consists of an intrinsic constituent of affection, and the affective context we live in is primarily a sphere of valences and salient values that have by and large impacted our comportments towards the other, such that it serves as a motivating basis for social encounters. Thusly understood, social interaction in its primitive form is, as it were, a process wherein the subject is initially affected, or "touched," in a meaningful way by what is affecting (Colombetti, 2017, p. 448; see also Mühlhoff, 2015).

However, what remains to be explored is precisely the sense in which the situated context is already imbued with significance, and the way in which one is primarily affected or solicited to respond to other people. Our responses to other people are, to be sure, highly selective, not only because their actions afford different

types of reactions but also because we for the most part coexist with multiple people and engage with more than one task in a specific situation. But why do I respond to *this* person rather than *that* person, and why do I respond to another person in *this* particular way instead of *some way else*? After all, "one's environment affords many possibilities for action, but each has its affective price tag, and they are not all equally affordable" (Bower & Gallagher, 2013, p. 122). To address these questions, we not only need to clarify the nature of social affordance and its affective composition but also to elucidate the underlying structure of social experience. It is precisely in this regard that, we believe, Husserl's profound analysis of affection can better illuminate the situatedness of social encounters as well as the multiple layers of social understanding,[1] as we demonstrate in the following sections.

3 Husserl on affection, situatedness and empathy

3.1 Life-world and distributed affection

It is well known that Husserl offers a highly systematic account of empathy in his *Cartesian Meditations*. In general, he thinks that empathy is primarily a peculiar form of intentionality directed at other human egos (*das fremdes Ich*) (Husserl, 1962, p. 321) and, importantly, empathy takes on multiple layers and denotes different dimensions of social experience (Zahavi, 2014, p. 136).[2] At the most basic and primitive level, empathy is constituted by an automatic associative pairing between oneself and the other thanks to the similarity between one's own and the other's body. It is on this motivating foundation that one comes to apperceive the other's body as another lived body, and the other person as another minded subject (see Husserl, 1960, p. 111). Only on this basis can one proceed to figure out the other's motives, beliefs and dispositions, so as to better understand the other's purposes or intentions (Husserl, 1960, pp. 128ff). As Held (1972) once noticed, it is at the most primitive and pre-reflective level of living with others that we can see the significance of the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) with regard to social encounters, and the particular role of affection in soliciting one to turn toward and engage with the other in the first place.[3]

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[1] Bower and Gallagher (2013) and Colombetti (2017) clearly notice that Husserl's work on affection may help to better elucidate the affective dimension of social understanding, they nonetheless merely mention him by passing and have not offered further analysis of his work.

[2] For a fuller overview of Husserl's theory of empathy, see Zahavi (2012). As Luo (2018) demonstrates, although empathy is a quasi-perceptual experience, it is essentially different from perception of physical objects, not only because other human bodies are expressive but also because empathy is fundamentally characterized by a twofold intentionality directed at the other.

[3] Dings (2018) recently proposed a non-Husserlian account of how affordances solicit action, and he suggested that there are three factors that we need to take in account when we conceptualize the solicitation in question: valence, force and mineness. It might seem strange that he didn't ever mention Husserl's theory, even though some of his characterizations are fundamentally akin to Husserl's. Nonetheless, in this paper, I focus more on the pre-reflective character of affect and the meaningfulness of the affective sphere, rather than engaging with the question of, say, "what determines whether a particular affordance solicits to act or not" (Dings 2018, p. 682), for the latter, see also Mühlhoff (2015).

On Husserl's account, the life-world is primarily a pre-given field where we carry out projects and live with others, a field in which we are preoccupied with various objects and plans, distinguishing them from others, thematizing and evaluating them in accordance with our own interests and habitus, and thus relating to them in different ways. As Husserl (1970, p. 108) points out, we are not only actively conscious of the surrounding world but can also be affected by it in the sense that the surrounding world is full of different sorts of experiential sedimentations that implicitly guide or misguide our thought and attitude, and it is imbued with various forms of meaning validities that constantly color our self-perception and perception of others. Hence, the life-world as an "affective sphere" essentially serves as a pragmatic and meaningful context for social interactions (ibid., p. 109). And Husserl adds that the affective sphere of the life-world is in principle different from a scientifically or theoretically defined realm. To be sure, under the telescope of exact science, the world under consideration is simply conceived as a homogeneous sphere and everything therein is taken to be objectively determined or determinable. From this objectivistic perspective, human beings are taken to be a causal composition between a psychical and a physical layer, whilst human bodies are conceived as a mere physical entity that is no different from, say, moving cars or robots (see McDowell, 1998, p. 393). We may in fact live with others, observe them moving in a certain way, yet fundamentally from an "disinterested" point of view (Husserl, 1970, p. 110). That is, we conceive other people as "mere objects" (ibid.). This way of conceiving the world is, according to Husserl, the result of a scientific abstraction that neutralizes the first-personal perspective and strikes out the relevance of pre-existing living presuppositions. However, as he also points out, the abstraction in question is made possible only on the ground that we have already lived a prescientific life and comported ourselves toward the world in various forms of praxis (ibid., p. 111).

It is against this backdrop that we can see how the life-world lays the ground for social understanding. Indeed, in genuine forms of interpersonal relationships such as love, friendship, dialogue, conflict, collaboration and so forth, we do not firstly thematize other people and take them to be determinate objects, as if we are detached and uninvolved observers (Held, 1972; see Gallagher, 2009, 2017). Quite the contrary, we pre-thematically live through these relationships, engage with others, and interact with them in some specific ways. That is not to iterate the trivial fact that we live with other people; rather, the point is that we understand others primarily through the perspectives of these relationships, taking stances toward others in accordance with implicit attitudes we have vis-à-vis others, such that we resonate with each other and find ourselves disposed toward a further course of actions. In other words, we first and foremost orient ourselves in the life-world and live smoothly with other people such that we may not even be aware of how significant this smoothness is. Social encounters thus take place first and above all pre-reflectively in that we are pre-thematically conscious of other people as minded subjects in a shared world (Held, 1972, p. 47; Husserl, 1989, p. 192; Zahavi, 2012, 2014).[4]

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[4] Zahavi (2012) distinguishes two related yet essentially different questions with regard to social cognition. It is one thing to ask whether we correctly understand another person's mental states, and it is quite another to ask whether another person is minded at all.

As Husserl demonstrates in his *Analyses Concerning Passive Synthesis* (2001), social surroundings as a whole are a pragmatically meaningful sphere[5] and the affective sphere is essentially delineated by an inherent distribution of affective forces. More specifically, social surroundings afford various possibilities for action, and each affects us in a different way and with a stronger or weaker strength of pull (Husserl, 2001, p. 164; Husserl, 1973b, p. 44; Mishara, 1990). For instance, when I am concentrating on revising this paper, with Debussy's music running at the background, which perhaps also includes odors of fruit peels in the trashcan, footsteps from the corridor, and so forth. These elements radiate stronger or weaker eliciting forces, striving to penetrate into my intentional arc, and rivaling for my attention. However, only that which is salient enough can stand out of the affective background and become sufficiently conspicuous so as to exert a discernible enticement, thereby pulling me to advert to it (Husserl, 2001, p. 149). For instance, a sudden noise in the corridor directly alters the contour of my affective sphere and calls for attention. That is, entities in the surroundings issue various degrees of affective enticement, thereby forming an affective contrast, where one enticement drowns out all other affective forces to the extent that it alone catches one's attentional focus—it solicits one's perceptual interest, so to say.

Importantly, Husserl holds that the affective sphere is orchestrated by a dynamic topology of affective forces. When a sensuous particularity protrudes out of the surroundings and penetrates into one's thematic focus, it immediately culminates in the affective sphere in the sense that it dominates other rivaling affective forces. As Mishara (1990) puts it, the prominent affective force forms the peak of the affective sphere, whereas other pre-given and less prominent forces constitute a general background with respect to the more salient one. Hence, the distribution of affective enticements makes up an affective topology of the living sphere, in accordance with which the affective focus defines the foreground of consciousness, whereas other less prominent particularities stand in the adjacency and tacitly form the background.[6] As Husserl puts it,

> in every living present that is looked upon universally, there is naturally a certain relief of salience, a relief of noticeability, and a relief that can get my attention. In this case, we accordingly distinguish between background and foreground. The foreground is what is thematic in the broadest sense. The nil of salience is found in a potentially considerable vivacity of a conscious having that does not, however, arouse any special responsive tendency in the ego, does not make it to the ego-pole (Husserl, 2001, p. 215).

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[5] In this regard, Husserl is suspicious about whether sheer sensuous data, something completely isolated from the Gestalt whole, could register in perceptual experience at all (Husserl, 1970, p. 85). And he further holds that mere sensuous objects–objects deprived of any meaning and value are the results of abstraction and, thus, they can hardly touch emotion (see Lotz, 2007, p. 40; Hart, 1992, pp. 88–89; Fuchs & Koch, 2014, p. 2).

[6] Aron Gurwitsch (2010) further distinguishes the conscious field into three constitutive segments: theme, thematic field and the unthematic or marginal field. See also Bégout (2007, p. 23) for further discussions.

To paraphrase, the living sphere is already affectively arranged or structured, exerting stronger or weaker affective enticements that compete for one's attention. However, I as a conscious subject can only direct my attentive regard toward one single object that constitutes the center of the perceptual field, whilst other adjacently given objects horizontally linger around, as it were, without my explicit explication of them. These environing objects nevertheless exert relatively stronger affective forces than those that are pre-given in the far-field of affective forces, such as things or experiential sediments that are comparatively irrelevant to the current concern. The latter group of affective forces are not completely null but implicitly inform ongoing experiences in various ways. It is in this regard that a broader context of cultural and historical factors continuously infuses into our experiences. Hence, perceptual experience is not only determined by the current thematic interest, constrained by actual environmental factors such as lighting condition and the distance between the perceiver and the percept. It is also in part influenced by one's physical conditions, dispositional inclination, as well as one's attitudes toward the object in a given situation—all these have a bearing on perceptual knowledge of the environment in an implicit or explicit way (see Bower & Gallagher, 2013, p. 123).

3.2 Affect and primitive social coupling

The distribution of affective forces has a direct implication for how the surrounding world scaffolds social understanding, not only because real-life encounters take place in specific situations but also because they are fundamentally colored by the affective topology of the living sphere (Fuchs & Koch, 2014). But then how does affect constitute a primitive basis for social understanding? And to what extent can an analysis of affection help illuminate some underlying aspects of social interactions, e.g., its dyadic character?

To see the point, we can illustrate with the following example. Suppose that you are sitting in an uproarious pub and talking with your friends. Hop aromas casually stir up your conversation about, say, picky comments on your paper. At some point, your attention cannot help being drawn to a corner, as if you were noticing something amazing, something stirring there. Your discussion continues, yet you simply cannot stop adverting to the corner. You find there someone sitting straight, beaming with an irresistible gleam. The closer you look, the more details you can find: it is a person with slightly curly hair, fair complexion, ocean-like blue eyes and so on. And you may have further interest to know this person, e.g., what she is talking about with her peers.

This case constitutes a primitive form of interpersonal engagement in that, only when someone in the social surroundings stands out of the affective background can he or she become noticeable in the first place. Before we can specifically "figure out" and actively mentalize about what another person feels and experiences, we have already adverted to the other's presence, switching our perceptual attention from what is at hand to the other's eliciting gesture. As Husserl puts it, "each I-do is a relatedness of the ego with something else, of which the ego is conscious. And the something must have already been noticed, so that the ego can above all turn

toward it; and without such turning-toward, there will be no comportment toward it. And the turning-toward presupposes affection, and only those that exert a stronger or weaker enticement upon the ego can affect" (Husserl, 1973b, p. 44). It is in this regard that the other's emergence in a situation is not *ex nihilo* but has already been pre-delineated by the social surroundings to the extent that the other's affective presence protrudes out of the pre-given surroundings (ibid., p. 439; Husserl, 2001, p. 212)—social surroundings that are intrinsically characterized by features of familiarity and acquaintance (Husserl, 2001, p. 210, Husserl, 1973c, p. 466; Held, 1972, p. 47). In this sense, prior to our explicating and explaining what is going on in another person's mind, her appearance is already charged with *some* kernel of meaning. As Husserl puts it,

> The foreign person, *who now becomes or should become known for the first time*, is not something that is easily understandable according to the concrete style, not experienceable as easily as what is already known, nor empirically apperceived at first glance with an experiential horizon that can be easily actualized and form knowledge. Instead, the foreign person is firstly an incomprehensible stranger. *Of course, everything that is so strange, so incomprehensible has a core of familiarity, without which it could not be experienced at all, nor experienceable as a foreign person* (Husserl, 1973c, p. 432; italics added; see also Husserl, 1960, p. 80).

It is clear that Husserl is aware of the complexity of understanding a foreign subject and he rejects the idea that we can fully know another person as we encounter her at first sight (see also Stein, 2008, p. 19). To know the other, as Husserl stresses, is by necessity to know her within an affective context, which by itself gives rise to a meaning constraint of the knowing in question. Hence, the context in question provides the empathizer with a robust acquaintance with the other, such that it lays out a "core" of empathic knowability. As Gurwitsch once observed, the meaning of what occurs in a context is inevitably "pre-scribed by the situation and its own structure" (1979, p. 67). When we advert to someone's presence due to the affective contrast she exerts upon the social surroundings, we can directly recognize her emotion in her gesture or intonation—she may appear "enthusiastic" or "fatigued," "interested" or "indifferent" in the specific context. However, as Stein once observed, in order to specify what the other's feeling is about and what motivates the other to have this feeling, we may need to appeal to more sophisticated cognitive skills, such as imaginative simulation, or even to verbal communication (Stein, 2008, p. 19; Zahavi, 2014). Indeed, this sort of affective acquaintance with the other is somehow "vague" and "inarticulate" (Husserl, 1973c, p. 462), and we may subsequently confirm, ascertain, amend, or even negate some of these experiential understandings. The point, however, is that such confirmation, ascertainment, amendment and negation can only take a foothold when there has already been a genetically robust acquaintance—i.e., an understanding first and foremost afforded and made possible by the empathic context. At this affective level, our understanding of the other's mental states has not yet been precisely determined, nor has the exact meaning of the other's conscious states been subordinated to propositional articulation and predication (Waldenfels, 2007, p. 23; Fuchs & Koch, 2014). Nonetheless, it is within a

rudimentary meaning context that I come to encounter the other in the first place, and genetically subsequent explanations and predications of the other's mental life are rooted in such a core of meaning.

Furthermore, Husserl thinks that social encounters at the affective level are essentially characterized by a dyadic inter-relation. As he sees it, another person's emergence out of an affective context "has a character of calling (*Anrufenden*), that of enticement exerting upon the ego" (Husserl, 1973c, p. 462). Hence, the other must have already affected the ego to the extent that his or her affective pull is sufficiently salient so as to initiate a counter-act (*An-tun*), such that I can listen to her (*Hinhören*), look around toward her (*Hinsehen*), or answer her appeal (*An-reden*), and so forth (ibid.). Importantly, this form of turning-to (*Zuwendung*) is not based upon reflective evaluation or judgment, as if we need to think of the other's presence and decide whether we shall react to it or not. As Husserl indicates, this primitive form of response is implicitly motivated by the other's affective enticement and it is in essence a motor intentionality insofar as it is intrinsically carried out by bodily mobility. As Fuchs and Koch (2014) illustrate, another person's sinister gaze, her sharp voice or expansive bodily movements may "induce" in the perceiver an intensified bodily feeling that triggers the perceiver to withdraw, whereas a hospitable smile at a greeting may "induce" a different sort of bodily feeling such that the perceiver tends to be relaxed and comply with the greeting. In other words, before we can reflect upon and verify what has been going on in this primitive response to the other, a "bodily resonance" has already coupled the empathizer and the empathizee: "our body is affected by the other's expression, and we experience the kinetics and intensity of his emotions through our own bodily kinaesthesia and sensation" (Fuchs, 2013, p. 625).

Hence, we can conclude at this point that the other's affective enticement and the empathizer's bodily advertence constitutes a primitive form of social coupling, and the other's affective approaching is correlated with an "answering comportment" (*antwortende Verhalten*) (Husserl, 1973c, p. 476). In other words, there is an affective structure underlying interpersonal interaction, insofar as the other's being- there-for-me-ness is already a form of affective force, it is an appeal to me, an addressing that I shall not avoid responding to; and conversely, I feel the other's affective pull and feel prompted to react to the other's appeal in an appropriate manner, e.g., by "answering yes" in either verbal or non-verbal expression (Husserl, 1973c, p. 476; Fuchs & Koch, 2014). In this regard, we may say that this affective intertwinement between oneself and the other constitutes the ground of social coupling,[7] where oneself and the other come into contact through the mere form of appeal and acceptance of the appeal, or more generally, of addressing and being addressed.

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[7] To be sure, this sort of dyadic inter-relation should not be confused with a proper sort of "reciprocal" engagement where both the empathizer and the empathizee need to be aware of each other, because the former denotes a particular correlation between the other's affective pull and the empathizer's bodily advertence, wherein there is no need for the other to be aware of the empathizer. In this regard, "reciprocal" is a too much strong term to describe what is at stake. For a further discussion of inter-affectivity, see Behnke (2008).

4 Affective coupling and empathy

In light of the above analysis, we can further specify some intrinsic features of social coupling in terms of inter-affectivity. In their paper "Participatory sense-making: an enactive approach to social cognition", De Jaegher and Di Paolo emphasize that affection constitutes a significant dimension of interaction and that affective states inevitably intervene and impact the process of interaction. As they illustrate, in a play between infant and mother, the infant's attention and responsiveness can be greatly re-oriented by the rhythm and tempo with which the mother interacts with him (2007, pp. 498–99). They suggest that, as a radical starting point for studying social cognition, interaction should be conceived as an active participation in the generation of meaning in mutual cooperation, which itself forms an autonomous and self-sustaining system throughout the unfolding of participatory sense-making. That is, only when interactors attentively engage with and collaborate with each other so as to sustain the dynamics of interaction, can they be pushed and pulled, attracted and repulsed by each other in that very process. On their account, affection is at best an addendum feature of interaction and it is essentially founded upon the active participatory sense-making process. For De Jaegher and Di Paolo, affection is nothing but a varying degree of feeling of one's connection with the other (ibid., p. 490).

In a similar vein, while Colombetti (2017) comes to see that affectivity is an indispensable factor for understanding the surrounding world, she nonetheless holds that the understanding or sense-making process consists in an active perspective-taking upon the surrounding world and an evaluation of its relevance for the self-maintenance of an autonomous organism, such that an agent can "enact or bring forth a world of significance in virtue of the organism's adaptive autonomy" (p. 451). For Colombetti, affectivity at the very least means that we as enactors are not indifferent to the surrounding world, which, as she puts it, "can be seen as a landscape of valued objects and events that invite us to relate to them in different ways" (ibid.).[8]

However, these characterizations confuse the exact level at which affectivity is at play and downplay the significance of affectivity with regard to social coupling. As should be clear by now, social understanding consists of different levels (Fuchs, 2013; Stueber, 2006; Zahavi, 2014). In Husserl's eyes, the affective coupling is pre-reflective in kind insofar as it is not an outcome of deliberate comparison, evaluation or decision-making. Genetically speaking, it precedes and lays the ground for higher-order active engagements with the other. As Husserl explains in his *Cartesian Meditations*, the primitive and passive form of empathy consists in a spontaneous and involuntary pairing between oneself and the other, where the other stands out of the perceptual field due to her prominent bodily similarity with one's own body (Husserl, 1960, pp. 112–113). It is on the basis of this inter-corporeal pairing that the empathizer can be motivated or induced to apperceive the other as another subject,

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[8] Colombetti seems to have noticed the passive aspect of affectivity, as she maintains that the surrounding world has a sort of "demand character" by which the surrounding world by itself solicits enactors to take further actions upon it. Fur a further analysis of the demand character, see Mühlhoff (2015).

as another perspective of the surrounding world (ibid.). Hence, the affective coupling between oneself and the other necessarily takes place at a rudimentarily corporeal level and implicitly permeates ongoing interpersonal interaction, thereby paving the way for possibly more advanced forms of social understanding.

On the other hand, affective coupling is not an addendum feature that is somehow separable from social interaction; rather, it is at bottom a motivating factor for social interaction. In Husserl's words, the other's contextual emergence elicits the subject's advertence, so that "the ego turns toward it attentively, and progresses from here, striving toward self-giving intuition, disclosing more and more of the self of the [other], thus, striving toward an acquisition of knowledge, toward a more precise view of the [other]" (Husserl, 2001, p. 196). And Husserl distinguishes between explicit and implicit forms of empathy; whereas in the former we are attentively engaging with others, busy with taking care of their well-being, we have in the latter merely been in an affective contact with the other in the perceptual field—for intance, feeling an experiential pull induced by the other's corporeal presence in terms of answering her appeal.[9] To be sure, this form of answering the other presupposes affectivity, insofar as one has to be pre-reflectively stimulated or attracted by the other and can thus be motivated to react to the other in the first place, such as attending or withdrawing, being hospitable or hostile, reacting with love or hate (Husserl, 1973c, p. 462; see also Fuchs & Koch, 2014, p. 2). It is in this sense that concrete social encounters are implicitly shaped by affective coupling, before one takes a further step to discriminate and ascertain other people's mental life (see Held, 1972, p. 45, 47).

Thus understood, affective coupling denotes a pre-thematic, pre-reflective way of relating to the other, in contrast to mainstream theories of mind-reading that heavily draw upon mentalization such as inference or imagination. And this affective coupling consists of a particular kind of intentionality by which one comes to contact with the other. As Fuchs and Koch notice (2014, p. 2), this variety of affective intentionality targets salient features of a situation and is directed at the other's corporeal prominence in the situation, thereby revealing what is significant and relevant in the situation *for* the empathizing subject. In real-life encounters, other people appear to be "familiar" or "strange," "attractive" or "indifferent," "friendly" or "hostile," and so forth. And these features are embodied in others' corporeal expression, such that, e.g., a warm smile at a greeting pulls people closer, whereas a hostile gaze pushes people away. In affective coupling, we not only pick up what matters to us, but we also re-orient our comportment and direct ourselves toward the salient and hence

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[9] To be noted, Husserl makes a similar differentiation between "genuine empathy" and "ungenuine empathy." As he writes, "ungenuine empathy is the passive associative indicating of a foreign subjectivity, whereas genuine empathy is actively co-doing and co-suffering, letting oneself be motivated egoically, but also, with respect to the underlying ground, pursuing the inner motivation instead of association" (Husserl, 1973a, p. 455). To paraphrase, genuine empathy is an active form of empathizing with others by actively making use of one's own experiences, knowledge and intellectual capacity, so as to achieve a better understanding of others in a certain circumstance. By contrast, ungenuine empathy is a prior and passive experience of the other, without "subsequent reflection" [nachkommenden Reflexion] upon such a passive encounter.

meaningful feature in a corresponding manner. As a pre-reflective appraisal of the situation, affective intentionality is essentially a sort of feeling-towards a thing, a person, or a state of affairs, and it constantly functions at the lowest level of conscious experience and serves as a transitional path to higher orders of cognition (Husserl, 2001, p. 277).[10]

Correlatively, we can see that affective intentionality is essentially dyadic in that to be affected not only means to be correlated with some salient feature of a situation, but it also means a concurrent and complementary feeling in the subject. As Husserl writes, "insofar as the enticement as such means an affection on the ego, which from the perspective of the ego corresponds to a being-drawn, a 'propensity' lies in the enticement itself" (Husserl, 2001, p. 86). That is, when affected by someone else, one feels a corporeal inclination, a bodily readiness so to say, to react to the particular enticement. For instance, the feeling I have when addressed by another person with a warm smile is experientially different from the feeling I have when coming across with someone I just had a quarrel with. In the latter case, I feel a sort of bodily contraction and tend to avoid eye contract; whereas in the former case, I tend to feel relaxed and comply with her intention, thereby responding to her addressing. Thus, a feeling of inclination, a corporeal "like" or "dislike," is inextricably intertwined with the affective intentionality, so that the other's enticement can be ultimately registered in one's conscious experience, be it a turning-toward or turning-away (Lotz, 2007, p. 52; Waldenfels, 2010).[11] And Husserl further thinks that this feeling inclination serves at bottom as the motivational basis for further actions, as he writes, "it affects the ego and affects it to a tendency to 'move' (*Ich bewege*), which goes hand in hand with an increasing or decreasing of feeling, and according to whether it is positive or negative and thus a following or turning-down in these directions, it inhibits the movement, increases or decreases them, and so forth" (Husserl, 1973b, p. 452). In this regard, our response to the social context is indeed "selective," simply because we do not equally react to all affective forces, nor do we react to them in an equal manner; on the contrary, we react to *this* particular person rather than someone else, and react to him or her in *this* specific way rather than *some way else* (see Waldenfels, 2010; also Dings, 2018).

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[10] For a fuller account of feeling intentionality and the role it plays in our being in the world, see Goldie (2002), Ratcliffe (2005) and Ratcliffe (2008).

[11] As a reviewer pointed out, Husserl's theory of feeling or feeling intentionality, as it is elaborated in *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas I*, is the view that feeling intentionality is founded upon perceptual presentation [For a further analysis of the founding relationship between feeling and perception, see, e.g., Lee (1998), Drummond (2006), Jardine (2015, 2017)]. It might follow that the sort of bodily feeling at the affective level when encountering another person depends upon perceptual presentation of the other, i.e., empathic perception (*Fremdwahrnehmung*), such that it is on the basis of a prior form of empathic experience of the other that social coupling can be instituted. However, we also think that Husserl's theory of feeling or feeling intentionality in light of his genetic analysis proves to be substantially different from his earlier view, and he thinks that affective feeling is passive and pre-thematic in kind and that it genetically precedes perceptual presentation of a specific object [see, e.g., Steinbock (2004)]. Luo (2019) has explained to what extent Husserl develops his view of feeling intentionality in contrast with his earlier one in the fifth *Logical Investigation*.

To sum up, affective coupling is a primal institution of interpersonal relation and it affords possibilities for further interactions. A social encounter is not a state of affairs where two individuals happen to come together and interact with each other; on the contrary, the way we comport ourselves toward other people is significantly influenced by their ways of behaving and gesticulating, by their intonations that indicate different attitudes, so that we can relate to them in one way or another. It is within this affective sphere that we come to understand others, notice whether they are in a positive or negative state, and tend to respond to them accordingly. The affective sphere is of such a heuristic significance that we can rudimentarily comprehend others' mental states without the need to appeal to sophisticated mentalization.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we mainly focused on the issue of affection and its contribution to social coupling and social understanding. We have mainly argued for three theses:

1. Social understanding is essentially embedded in a situated context that is delineated by stronger or weaker affective forces, and the situated context as a lived and affective sphere is full of meaning and reference;
2. Affectivity primarily takes place at the passive and pre-reflective level where the other protrudes out of a social context, thereby inducing in the empathizer a corresponding affective state and re-orienting the empathizer's perspective toward the other;
3. Affective form of social coupling constitutes a primal institution of an interpersonal relationship in that our most initial relationship with the other is not by means of theorization or simulation but by responding to the other's addressing, answering the other's appeal, and thus engaging with the other.

With these theses, we hope to have shown that affective coupling shall not be conceived as an accompanying phenomenon, or an addendum feature that can be explained away from the course of interpersonal interaction. On the contrary, affective coupling as a direct acquaintance with the other precedes higher orders of specification, interpretation and prediction. It is a meaning constraint of how we could possibly understand or misunderstand others and it affords possibilities of taking further actions upon them.

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