

Shared Emotions and the Body

Gerhard Thonhauser¹

Abstract: According to individualism about feelings, only individuals can experience feelings, because only individuals live under the condition of embodiment. Assuming a necessary link between emotions and feelings thus seems to justify doubt about the possibility of shared emotions. I challenge this line of argumentation by showing that feelings are best understood as enactments of a feeling body, which is a psycho-physically neutral expressive unity. Based on the body's embeddedness into a world and connectedness with others, feelings are perceivable and shareable. Accordingly, dynamics of mutual incorporation and interaffectivity are shown to be the ground for shared feelings.

Keywords: Shared emotions; shared feelings; embodiment; feeling body; intercorporeality; interaffectivity

Introduction

Over the last decade, collective emotions have received increased attention from researchers in various disciplines.² At the same time, many remain skeptical as to whether something like a genuinely collective emotion is possible. There are two powerful intuitions supporting this skepticism: the first concerns consciousness, with the idea being that, while it might be meaningful to speak of group minds, group consciousness is inconceivable. The second concerns the body and holds that groups cannot have a body, i.e., they do not live under the condition of embodiment. If one assumes that an emotion necessarily involves conscious experience and bodily feelings, these intuitions make it doubtful that emotions beyond individual bodies are possible.

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² For an overview of the debate see Christian von Scheve and Mikko Salmela, eds., *Collective Emotions: Perspectives from Psychology, Philosophy, and Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

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Against this background, this paper addresses the role of the body in shared emotions. Building on phenomenological notions of the body and on enactive approaches prominent in cognitive science and the philosophy of mind, I will develop an account of the *bodiliness*³ of feelings that makes it plausible how feelings can be shared between bodies. To be sure, there are numerous versions of enactivism just as there are various phenomenological accounts of the body, and they diverge on many key issues. However, I aim at reconstructing common threads of an understanding of the body that allows one to defend the possibility of shared feelings. Such an understanding of the body, which is probably closest to the ideas of the French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, contains three key features: first, it proposes a comprehensive understanding of the body, taking the entire organism and its interaction with the environment into account; second, it implies a comprehensive understanding of intentionality, considering the whole complexity of lived experience; and third, it emphasizes the relationality of bodies, focusing on how they affect and are affected by each other.

In this paper, I do not defend a particular theory of shared emotions.⁴ Rather, I focus on refuting a powerful objection against the possibility of shared emotions. If my argument is convincing, it shows that presupposing a necessary link between emotions and bodily feelings does not bind one to the view that shared emotions are impossible. If we take the *bodiliness of feelings* and *mutual incorporation* and *interaffectivity* into

³ Throughout this paper, the term “bodiliness” will be used rather than “embodiment.” The term “embodiment” makes it appear as if there is a dualism of mind and body which then needs to be overcome by *embodying* the mind. By contrast, this paper defends the claim that feelings are bodily in a way that is prior to any mind-body dualism.

⁴ I have done so on other occasions. Gerhard Thonhauser, “Shared Emotions: A Steinian Proposal,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 17, no. 5 (2018): 997–1015; Gerhard Thonhauser and Michael Wetzels, “Emotional Sharing in Football Audiences,” *The Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 46, no. 2 (2019): 224–43; Gerhard Thonhauser, “A Multifaceted Approach to Emotional Sharing,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 27, no. 9–10 (2020).

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account, there is nothing mysterious about feelings being shared between bodies. On the contrary, it supports the view that affectivity needs to be located in the entire organism and its interaction with the environment and others, and that (an adequately understood) sharedness of feelings is the norm rather than the exception.

The paper proceeds in five steps. I begin with critically assessing a prominent example of the view that worries about a group body and group consciousness are reasons to reject the notion of emotions beyond individual bodies (part 1). Turning to my positive argument, I first discuss the phenomenological turn in the philosophy of emotions, which allows me to develop the notion of the *feeling body* (part 2). Second, I review the current debate on social cognition. Building on the perceptual turn in this debate, I advance an understanding of the *bodiliness of feelings* (part 3). This understanding will be deepened in the following part in which I emphasize the role of interaction for social perception (part 4). Finally, I discuss enactive and phenomenological notions of *mutual incorporation* and *interaffectivity*, which emphasize the body as the scene of embeddedness and connectedness and underscore the fundamental relationality of affectivity (part 5). The paper will be summed up by a brief conclusion.

Connor's argument against the possibility of collective emotions

Before I proceed with my positive argument, let me present an example of widespread assumptions about emotions and the body. This will allow me to identify a number of misconceptions of the body which this paper sets out to challenge. Steven Connor claims that there are “reasons to feel doubtful” about the possibility of collective emotions. From (1) the absence of collective feelings and (2) the necessary role of

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feelings for emotions, he infers (C) that collective emotions are impossible.⁵ Connor bases his argument against the possibility of collective emotions on a critique of Margaret Gilbert's account of collective emotions.⁶ Gilbert holds that emotions are evaluative judgments. She suggests that feelings usually accompany these evaluative judgments, but that they are not necessary for an emotion to occur. Based on the disjunction of emotions and feelings, Gilbert defends the possibility of collective emotions. Connor, by contrast, assumes a necessary connection between emotions and feelings, and thus, concludes that collective emotions are impossible.

What are Connor's reasons for thinking that collective feelings are impossible? The core of his argument appears to be that collective subjects cannot feel emotions because they do not have a body. He claims that collective subjects are "zombies, because they do not exist in a condition of embodiment."⁷ For the notion of a collective emotion to make sense, the emotion would need to be felt by a group mind "*lodged in a group body*."⁸ Whereas Connor allows for the notion of a group mind (and thus collective beliefs and collective intentions), he is convinced that a group body is a highly dubious notion of the "flimsiest and most phantasmal kind of wishfulfilment."⁹ As a consequence, he considers the notion of collective feelings implausible. Connor's view is based on a powerful intuition: *individualism about feelings*.¹⁰ According to this view, feelings necessarily belong to an individual. An important motivation for individualism about feelings is considerations about the body. If we understand the

⁵ Steven Connor, "Collective Emotions: Reasons to Feel Doubtful" (The History of Emotions annual lecture, Queen Mary, University of London, October 9, 2013), stevenconnor.com/collective/collective.pdf.

⁶ Margaret Gilbert, "Collective Guilt and Collective Guilt Feelings," *Journal of Ethics* 6 (2002): 115–43.

⁷ Connor, "Collective Emotions: Reasons to Feel Doubtful," 10.

⁸ Connor, 2.

⁹ Connor, 16.

¹⁰ Hans Bernhard Schmid, *Plural Action* (Berlin: Springer, 2009), 70.

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body as “the theatre of emotions,”¹¹ it is reasonable to assume that feelings are always felt within one’s own body. If this is the case, it appears doubtful whether something like a supra-individual feeling can exist.

The considerations about feelings and the body which I will discuss over the remainder of this paper are meant to show that Connor’s intuition is misled insofar as it involves the wrong assumption that a necessary link between feelings and the body implies that feelings are, so to say, “trapped inside” a body. Localizing feelings “within” a body is not the only way of understanding the bodily nature of feelings, and it is not the most plausible either. Although all feelings are bodily, that does not speak against the possibility of feelings being shared “beyond” individual bodies. Rather, it supports the hypothesis that our body plays a constitutive role for our openness towards experiencing feelings together with others.

More specifically, I identify three interrelated misconceptions about the relationship of feelings and the body which I take to motivate the intuition exemplified in Connor’s talk:

- (1) Feelings are feelings of the body, and thus, they are separated from the world-directedness of emotions.
- (2) Feelings are located “inside” individual bodies, and thus, each only has access to her own feelings.
- (3) Individuals are individuated via their bodies, and thus, the body is what separates us from the world and others.

Against these assumptions, I defend three counterclaims:

¹¹ António Damásio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1994), 155.

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- (1) Although feelings are bodily, they are primarily not directed towards one's own body, but towards objects and events in the world.
- (2) Feelings are enacted in the expressive unity of the body. Under regular circumstances, this enables us to directly perceive each other's feelings.
- (3) Rather than closing us off from our material and social environment, the body needs to be understood as constitutive for our embeddedness into the world and our connectedness with others.

This allows us to see that the way Connor sets up the debate leads to a wrong dichotomy. According to his view, we either need to accept the dubious notion of a *group body*,¹² or we need to reject the notion of feelings being shared beyond individual bodies altogether. However, between the claim of feelings being locked inside individual bodies, and the claim of a group body, there is ample room for a nuanced understanding of how feelings can be experienced together by a plurality of individuals. Because of an overtly simplistic understanding of the body, Connor neglects an entire field of investigation. The question is not whether there is a group body capable of having feelings. Rather, the real issue is how our bodiliness opens us up to the possibility of experiencing feelings together with others.

¹² In their phenomenological account of group-directed empathy, Salice and Taipale defend the claim that there might be a *collective body* with an expressiveness that is not reducible to individual bodies. However, they do not address the ontological status of such a *collective body*. See Alessandro Salice and Joonas Taipale, "Group-Directed Empathy: A Phenomenological Account," *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 45 (2015): 163–84.

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Feelings as bodily states and as ways of experiencing the world

Let me now move to my positive argument. In this part, I begin with a discussion of the first misconception and defend the view that the bodiliness and the intentionality of feelings need to be thought of together in the notion of the *feeling body*.¹³

Philosophical research on emotions in the second half of the 20th century was dominated by cognitivist approaches.¹⁴ Whereas some held that feelings merely accompany emotions under regular circumstances,¹⁵ others attempted to reconcile the bodily nature of emotions with their world-directedness.¹⁶ However, the latter also maintained that the intentionality of an emotion is firmly located in its cognitive component. Over the last two decades, this paradigm has come under pressure by what could be called a *phenomenological turn in philosophy of emotions*.¹⁷ The core idea is to understand emotions as “felt evaluations”¹⁸ or “evaluative feelings.”¹⁹ It is impossible to consider emotions independently from the way in which they are felt without losing grip of their emotionality, just as it is impossible to consider emotions independently from

¹³ Giovanna Colombetti, *The Feeling Body: Affective Science Meets the Enactive Mind* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2014).

¹⁴ Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will* (London: Routledge, 1963); Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990); Robert C. Solomon, *The Passions. Emotions and the Meaning of Life*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993).

¹⁵ Gilbert, “Collective Guilt and Collective Guilt Feelings.”

¹⁶ Robert C. Solomon, “Emotions, Cognition, Affect: On Jerry Neu’s ‘A Tear Is an Intellectual Thing,’” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 108, no. 1/2 (2002): 133–42.

¹⁷ Peter Goldie, *The Emotions. A Philosophical Exploration* (Exford: Clarendon Press, 2000); Matthew Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Jan Slaby, *Gefühl Und Weltbezug: Die menschliche Affektivität im Kontext einer neo-existentialistischen Konzeption von Personalität* (Paderborn: mentis, 2008); Hans Bernhard Schmid, “Shared Feelings: Towards a Phenomenology of Collective Affective Intentionality,” in *Concepts of Sharedness: Essays on Collective Intentionality*, ed. Hans Bernhard Schmid, Nikolaos Psarros, and Katinka Schulte-Ostermann (Frankfurt am Main: Ontos, 2008).

¹⁸ Bennett W. Helm, “Felt Evaluations. A Theory of Pleasures and Pains,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 39 (2002): 13–30.

¹⁹ Bennett W. Helm, “Emotions as Evaluative Feelings,” *Emotion Review* 1 (2009): 248–55.

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their evaluative character without losing sight of their intentionality. This implies that the intentionality of an emotion cannot be separated from how it is felt.

Peter Goldie was one of the first to advocate a return to a close link between emotions and feelings. Goldie's claim is that the world-directedness of an emotion involves feelings that are themselves directed towards objects or events in the world. More precisely, he claims that emotions contain two kinds of feelings: *bodily feelings* and *feelings towards*.²⁰ Goldie takes both to be intentional, but to be directed towards different objects. *Bodily feelings* are directed towards the conditions of one's own body. By contrast, *feelings towards* are directed towards the object of an emotion. For example, when a dangerous animal approaches me, the feeling towards has the animal as its object, feeling it as dangerous, whereas the bodily feeling is directed towards my bodily reactions, e.g. the shivering of my limbs. Whereas the cognitivist paradigm assumes a clear distinction between experiences of the world and experiences of the body, or between cognitive and bodily components of an emotion, Goldie holds that "emotional feelings are inextricably intertwined with the world-directed aspect of emotion, so that an adequate account of an emotion's intentionality, of its directedness towards the world outside one's body, will at the same time capture an important aspect of its phenomenology. Intentionality and phenomenology are inextricably linked."²¹

Matthew Ratcliffe radicalized the claim that the intentionality of an emotion lies in the feeling. He did so by criticizing Goldie's distinction between feeling towards and bodily feeling. Taking seriously the claim that in the case of emotions, the intentionality cannot be separated from the phenomenology, Ratcliffe suggests that we need to understand "how something can be both a bodily feeling *and* a feeling towards

²⁰ Goldie, *The Emotions. A Philosophical Exploration*, 51–62.

²¹ Peter Goldie, "Emotions, Feelings and Intentionality," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 1 (2002): 242.

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something else.”²² In other words, he challenges us to think that bodily feeling and feeling towards are phenomenologically inextricable, since there is no phenomenological basis to draw a sharp distinction between feelings of the body and experiences of the world. The crucial step is to note that a bodily feeling does not need to have the body as its object. An experience can be made *through* bodily feelings, and nevertheless be *directed towards* something other than the body. Even when a feeling is phenomenologically localized in a specific part of the body, such body part does not need to be the object of the feeling. For instance, when someone feels “butterflies in their stomach,” the feeling is usually not directed towards their stomach, but towards their love interest. Sometimes the body might come to the forefront as the object of the feeling, but when experience functions regularly, the body drifts into the background, becoming the transparent medium of experience.²³ It is hence more adequate to think of the body as *doing the feeling*, rather than thinking of it as *what is felt*. We should conceive of the role that the body has in feeling in terms of a *feeling* body, not a *felt* body. This traces back to how Husserl approached the phenomenological investigation of the body: “The body is, in the first place, the *medium of all perception*; it is the *organ of perception* and is *necessarily* involved in all perception.”²⁴ If we follow this idea, it is easy to see how all feelings can be bodily, although most of the time the body is not the object of the feeling.

²² Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, 35.

²³ Legrand suggests that there are two complementary ways in which the body is pre-reflectively experienced: as a “performative body,” when the pre-reflective experience is of the body itself, and as a “transparent body,” when the world is experienced *through* the body. In both cases, the body is not perceived as an object, but as perceiving and acting. Dorethée Legrand, “Pre-Reflective Self-Consciousness: On Being Bodily in the World,” *Janus Head* 9, no. 2 (2007): 493–519.

²⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Second Book*, trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), 61.

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Whereas I embrace this position, there is one qualification to be made. As Husserl pointed out in the *Logical Investigations*, there is a deceptive equivocation in the way we use the term feeling. Sometimes, we use the term to refer to *intentional feelings*, or *feeling-acts* (*Gefühlsakte*) as Husserl calls them, while in other instances, it refers to *feeling-sensations* (*Gefühlsempfindungen*).²⁵ The crucial difference is that while *feeling-acts* belong to the class of *intentional acts*, *feeling-sensations* are not themselves intentional, but contents of intentional acts. The distinction can be illuminated when considering that, for example, a pain sensation does not determine the mode in which it is felt; one can suffer from pain, endure it, or enjoy it. This shows that feeling-sensations are contents of intentional feelings and that various types of intentional feelings can be directed towards the same feeling-sensation (i.e. either suffering from, bravely enduring, or enjoying one and the same feeling-sensation of pain).

It is my impression that a similar intuition led Goldie to introduce the distinction of feeling towards and bodily feeling. However, if his notion of *bodily feelings* was indeed meant to refer to *feeling-sensations*, he was mistaken in conceptualizing them as intentional. Feeling-sensations are not themselves intentional; they are part of intentional feelings. It requires an abstraction from the richness of an intentional feeling to isolate the feeling-sensation. Goldie came very close to that insight when stating that “the phenomenology of emotion is such that we *experience* bodily feelings and feelings towards almost as one.”²⁶ Indeed, we usually experience intentional feelings and feeling-sensations as one and only in an act of abstraction can we differentiate them from each other.

²⁵ Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations. Volume 2*, trans. J. N. Findlay (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 109–12.

²⁶ Goldie, “Emotions, Feelings and Intentionality,” 247.

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The distinction between intentional feelings and feeling-sensations is particularly useful for clarifying what is at stake in the question whether feelings can be shared beyond individual bodies. It is sensible to assume that in the case of *feeling-sensations*, it is true that we can only experience our own sensations and that there is no access to the sensations of others. As a consequence, we cannot share a feeling-sensation in any non-metaphorical sense. We can only imagine or simulate how it would be to have the sensation that we presume the other to have, and this capacity is based on the previous experience of our own sensations. However, I do not see a *prima facie* reason why the same should apply to *intentional feelings*. Thus, the distinction between feeling-sensations and intentional feelings allows us to specify that the question is not whether or not we are able to have the same feeling-sensations as others – we are not. Rather, the question is whether or not it is possible to perceive the intentional feelings of others, or indeed, experience them together with others. But of course, addressing this issue requires further discussion, which will be the topic of the following part. Before I proceed, let me note that whenever I use the term feeling, it is short for intentional feeling.

Feelings and the psycho-physically neutral unity of the body

The question if, and if yes, how we are able to perceive the feelings of others has been discussed extensively in the debate on social cognition. In this part, I will review recent trends in this debate pertaining to the ontological status of feelings and the epistemological question of their accessibility.

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Until recently, the debate on social cognition was dominated by two paradigms: Theory-theory and simulation theory.²⁷ Both paradigms are based on the “unobservability principle,”²⁸ according to which each only has access to her own mental life, while the mental lives of others are taken to be perceptually inaccessible. The assumption is that in the case of others, we only have an immediate perception of their bodies, and the experience of the mental lives of others can only be conveyed through the perception of their bodies. Lately, the unobservability principle has been challenged by direct perception accounts of social cognition, which claim that under normal circumstances we are able to perceive others’ intentions and feelings, without necessarily relying upon extra-perceptual cognitive mechanisms like inferences or simulations.²⁹

A perceptual account of social cognition fits well with a perceptual account of feelings, as it was presented in the previous part. In both cases, we are dealing with complex perceptions – Gallagher calls them “smart perception”³⁰ – which provide rich information: a feeling is more than a pure perception of an object; it also provides an immediate evaluation, not only of the object but also of my relation to that object.³¹ Similarly, in social cognition I am not only perceiving the physical appearance of

²⁷ Simon Baron-Cohen, Helen Tager-Flusberg, and Michael Lombardo, eds., *Understanding Other Minds: Perspectives from Developmental Social Neuroscience*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Alvin Goldman, *Simulating Minds: The Philosophy, Psychology, and Neuroscience of Mindreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²⁸ Joel Krueger, “Seeing Mind in Action,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 11 (2012): 149.

²⁹ Shaun Gallagher, “The Practice of Mind: Theory, Simulation or Primary Interaction,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8, no. 5–7 (2001): 83–108; Joel Krueger and Søren Overgaard, “Seeing Subjectivity: Defending a Perceptual Account of Other Minds,” *ProtoSociology: Consciousness and Subjectivity* 47 (2012): 239–62; Joel Krueger, “Direct Social Perception,” in *Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition*, ed. Albert Newen, Leon De Bruin, and Shaun Gallagher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³⁰ Shaun Gallagher, “Direct Perception in the Intersubjective Context,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 17 (2008): 535–43.

³¹ Jan Slaby and Achim Stephan, “Affective Intentionality and Self-Consciousness,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 17 (2008): 506–13.

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another individual, but immediately get a glimpse of the affective life of that individual.³² Discussing the merits and problems of perceptual accounts of social cognition goes beyond the scope of this paper. I will only draw on these resources insofar as they pertain to the *bodiliness of feelings* and allow me to emphasize the role of interaction in social perception.

A perceptual account of social cognition holds that (at least some) feelings are (at least sometimes) perceivable. Shaun Gallagher suggests that the mental states of others are “normally and frequently apparent in their embodied and contextualized behaviors, including their vocalization, gesture, facial expression, eye gaze, and situated posture.”³³ The claim is that the feeling is *in* the expressive body, not somewhere *behind* it. This enables socially smart perception to grasp feelings in their bodiliness. This proposal draws on accounts of the body as they were developed in classic phenomenology, especially in the works of Max Scheler and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Scheler urges us to rely on the phenomenological evidence: “For we certainly believe ourselves to be directly acquainted with another person’s joy in his laughter, with his sorrow and pain in his tears, with his shame in his blushing, with his entreaty in his outstretched hands. [...] If anyone tells me that this is not ‘perception’, for it cannot be so [...], I would beg him to turn aside from such questionable theories and address

³² Strictly speaking, it is more adequate to say that feeling and social cognition are *similar* to perception, but that they are not perception in a narrow sense. For that reason Bennett Helm speaks of emotions as mental acts *sui generis* that do not fit into the classic belief-desire-model of intentionality. See Helm, “Felt Evaluations. A Theory of Pleasures and Pains.” Similarly, Edith Stein classifies empathy (*Einfühlung*) – her term for social cognition – as a mental act *sui generis* which is similar to perception, but not the same, as it has different criteria of evidence. See Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, The Collected Works of Edith Stein 3 (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1989).

³³ Shaun Gallagher, “In Defense of Phenomenological Approaches to Social Cognition: Interaction with the Critics,” *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 3 (2012): 188.

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himself to the phenomenological facts.”³⁴ Merleau-Ponty echoes this approach:

“Consider an angry or threatening gesture. [...] I do not perceive the anger or the threat as a psychological fact hidden behind the gesture, I read the anger in the gesture. The gesture does not *make me think* of anger, it is the anger itself.”³⁵ It is not easy to explicate the details of Scheler and Merleau-Ponty’s proposals and there is much debate about the precise content of their claims.³⁶ Without being able to go into all the details, I consider it crucial to rebut two possible misunderstandings of such a phenomenological approach to social cognition.

First, suggesting that we can have immediate access to the feelings of others does not imply that the self-other distinction dissolves and that I have the same access to the feelings of others as I have to my own feelings. There remains an asymmetry, as Merleau-Ponty explains: “The other’s grief or anger never has precisely the same sense for him and for me. For him, these are lived situations; for me, they are appresented”³⁷ within his behavior. In the case of my own feelings, I experience them “from the inside”; I have first-person access and they are given *as mine*. In the case of the feelings of another, they are given *as her* feelings and I have no first-person access. In social perception, I grasp someone else’s experiences *as her* experiences. Hence, social perception precisely means that I do not live through (or simulate) the other’s experiences but perceive them as the experiences of the other. However, this

³⁴ Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, trans. Paul Kegan (London: Routledge, 1954), 260–61.

³⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London & New York: Routledge, 2012), 190.

³⁶ For example, different conceptualizations of the relationship between mental phenomena and bodily expressions are suggested that broadly build on Scheler and Merleau-Ponty. Krueger suggests a relation of constitution, according to which an expression constitutes a proper part of an emotion, whereas Overgaard thinks of it in terms of a component-integral object relation. See Krueger, “Seing Mind in Action”; Søren Overgaard, “McNeill on Embodied Perception Theory,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 64, no. 254 (2014): 135–43.

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 372.

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clarification does not imply that we need to reintroduce clear dichotomies of “inside” and “outside,” “mental,” and “physical”. As I will show shortly, it is more promising to understand the body as a hybrid entity of “internal” and “external,” “psychic,” and “physical.” Understanding the body as a hybrid entity makes comprehensible the bodiliness of my own feelings as well as the ability to immediately grasp the feelings of others.

Second, a phenomenological approach to social cognition does not run into the risk of behaviorism. The main difference is that phenomenology does not understand the body as a physical entity, but as an “expressive unity”³⁸ (*Ausdruckseinheit*) that is “undivided between body and consciousness.”³⁹ In our encounter with the other, we are neither confronted with a mere body, nor with a mere mind, but with a unity of mind and body. We primarily experience the body of the other not as a physical object, but as a field of expressions; in and through the expressive qualities of her body we directly encounter the other’s feelings.⁴⁰ Following this idea of the body as a psycho-physically neutral unity, the *feeling body* can neither be classified as mental nor as physical, as it was prior to this dichotomy. This psycho-physical neutrality of the body applies to my own body just as much as it applies to the bodies of others. If we follow this understanding of the *feeling body*, neither the world-directedness of my own feelings nor the accessibility of foreign feelings are mysterious. Their mysteriousness derives from the misconception of feelings as mental states and of the body as a physical entity. “The existence of others is difficult for and an affront to objective thought,” writes Merleau-Ponty. “There is no room [...] for others and for a plurality of consciousness

³⁸ Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, 218.

³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 372.

⁴⁰ Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 51–54.

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within objective thought.”⁴¹ By contrast, “if the other’s body is not an object for me, nor my body an object for him,”⁴² then there is nothing mysterious about social perception.

To sum up, the *bodiliness of feelings* implies the *ontological thesis* that feelings are enacted in the expressive unity of the psycho-physically neutral body. This ontological thesis solves the *epistemological issue* of how we are able to grasp what others feel: we are able to perceive the feelings of others because they are perceivable in their expressive bodies.

Feelings, social perception, and interaction

Recently, interaction theory was introduced as another alternative to established accounts of social cognition, combining enactivism and Merleau-Ponty-inspired branches of phenomenology.⁴³ Interaction theory holds that interaction makes possible the understanding of others’ feelings. This implies a *developmental claim*, according to which a background of shared habitualizations enables social perception, and a *facilitation claim*, which holds that current interaction facilitates social perception. Both claims can be found in Gallagher’s original introduction of the interactive approach, where he suggests that “primary intersubjectivity” is a “set of embodied practices and capabilities,”⁴⁴ which are both developmentally primary and continue to be the primary way we understand others in second-person interactions.

Let me begin with the facilitation claim. Supporters of an interactive approach claim that speaking of social cognition is, in a sense, already misleading, as it implies a

⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 364–65.

⁴² Merleau-Ponty, 368.

⁴³ Hanne De Jaegher and Ezequiel Di Paolo, “Participatory Sense-Making,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 6, no. 4 (2007): 485–507; Hanne De Jaegher, “Social Understanding through Direct Perception? Yes, by Interacting,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 18 (2009): 535–42; Hanne De Jaegher, Ezequiel Di Paolo, and Shaun Gallagher, “Can Social Interaction Constitute Social Cognition?,” *Trends in Cognitive Science* 14 (10) (2010): 441–47.

⁴⁴ Gallagher, “The Practice of Mind: Theory, Simulation or Primary Interaction.”

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cognitive situation in which a non-involved observer wonders about another individual's feelings. Against this assumption, interactive approaches hold that we are usually not in the position of a distant observer who tries to figure out what another individual is thinking and feeling. Rather, the common way of encountering others is by interacting with them. When interacting with others, we engage in perception-action loops which provide us with rich information about each other. The continuous responses to one another, as well as the (physical and social) contexts in which the interaction is embedded, provide interacting parties with the necessary cues enabling them to effortlessly understand each other, thereby limiting the need for closer inspection. Given the rich information that interaction provides, interacting individuals usually are in a good position to have the relevant understanding of each other. Moreover, understanding what others think and feel is usually not a singular cognitive act, but part of an ongoing interactive process in which the shared sense of our encounter and our understanding of one another are continuously refined. If interaction works smoothly, there is just no need to adopt an observer stance towards the other.

But of course, the intentions and feelings of others are not always transparent to us; "the other person may in some circumstances be a real puzzle,"⁴⁵ and thus, we regularly engage in higher-level processes of wondering about others' intentions and feelings. This leads to the developmental claim that a history of interaction in similar socio-cultural contexts enables social perception. Merleau-Ponty suggests that based on long and on-going histories of interaction, individuals adopt *affective styles*, i.e. characteristic manners of comportment (ways of speaking, gestures, postures, etc.), that

⁴⁵ Gallagher, "Direct Perception in the Intersubjective Context," 540.

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are typical of the relevant socio-cultural contexts.⁴⁶ The primary site of the development and enactment of an affective style is the feeling body. This leads us to consider how the behavior of the feeling body always enacts certain affective styles. If an individual is familiar with an affective style, it becomes possible for her to understand the feelings and actions of bodies enacting that style. I consider Merleau-Ponty's proposal in line with recent developments in emotion research, especially with research on embodied emotions and a situated perspective on affectivity.⁴⁷ The core idea is that feelings and emotions are not internal states of an organism, but expressive states serving a communicative or interactive function.⁴⁸ In order to understand this communicative function, we need to study how emotional expressions are socially scaffolded in various ways and always enact a specific repertoire of emotions.⁴⁹

Possible mechanisms leading to familiarity with an affective style have been studied in various disciplines. Research in social psychology has mainly focused on studying how humans are prone to automatically imitate the behavior of others. Chartrand and Bargh call this the *chameleon effect*.⁵⁰ Sociological research explored the role of *feeling rules* for establishing how individuals ought to feel in given situations.

⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 195; cf. Giovanna Colombetti, "Affective Incorporation," in *Phenomenology for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. J. Aaron Simmons and J. Edward Hackett (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 231–48.

⁴⁷ Paula M. Niedenthal, "Embodying Emotion," *Science* 316, no. 5827 (2007): 1002–5, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1136930>; Paul Griffiths and Andrea Scarantino, "Emotions in the Wild: The Situated Perspective on Emotion," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Situated Cognition*, ed. Philip Robbins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 437–53.

⁴⁸ Wendy Wilutzky, "Emotions as Pragmatic and Epistemic Actions," *Frontiers in Psychology* 6, no. 1593 (2015): 1–10.

⁴⁹ Giovanna Colombetti and Joel Krueger, "Scaffoldings of the Affective Mind," *Philosophical Psychology* 28, no. 8 (2015); A. von Poser et al., "Emotion Repertoires," in *Affective Societies: Key Concepts*, ed. Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve (New York: Routledge, 2019), 241–51.

⁵⁰ Tanya L. Chartrand and John A. Bargh, "The Chameleon Effect. The Perception-Behavior Link and Social Interaction," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 76, no. 6 (1999): 893–910.

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Individuals need to manage their feelings to fit with social expectations.⁵¹ It has been suggested that sociological research on emotion work can be combined with the psychological model of emotion regulation to investigate how “emotion regulation is systematically shaped by culture and society.”⁵² These findings suggest that one’s own expressive behavior, the perception of others’ behavior, as well as social interaction patterns are facilitated, modulated, and regulated by group-specific feeling rules. This claim also finds support in recent studies in social psychology showing that cultural display rules and emotion regulation are linked with emotion recognition.⁵³ Taken together, there is ample empirical research supporting the thesis that socio-cultural proximity, achieved by a history of interaction in similar socio-cultural contexts and sedimented in similar affective styles, enables and facilitates social perception. At the same time, the habitualization of the feeling body into certain affective styles also implies a disposition to be more prone to engage in social interactions with individuals embodying similar styles. Thus, it is sensible to assume that socio-cultural proximity is an enabling and limiting factor for social interaction and perception.⁵⁴

At this point, let me briefly summarize the key impulses that perceptual and interactive approaches to social cognition can provide for the issue of shared feelings. I take these approaches to challenge three interrelated misconceptions about the connection of feelings and the body. They challenge (1) the mentality of feelings, (2) the physicality of the body, and (3) the idea that social perception typically takes the

⁵¹ Arlie Russell Hochschild, “Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure,” *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 3 (1979): 551–75.

⁵² Christian von Scheve, “Emotion Regulation and Emotion Work: Two Sides of the Same Coin?,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 3, no. 496 (2012): 1.

⁵³ David Matsumoto et al., “Culture, Display Rules, and Emotion Judgments,” *Psychology: The Journal of the Hellenic Psychological Society* 23, no. 1 (2018): 7–23.

⁵⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

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form of distant observation. By contrast, these approaches suggest an understanding of the *bodiliness of feelings*, which holds that feelings are enacted in a *feeling body* which is a psycho-physically neutral expressive unity – something that is true both for my own body and the bodies of others. Because feelings are enacted in the *feeling body*, it is possible for others to perceive them. However, social perception is not an automatism and does not work smoothly under all circumstances. Expressive behavior always enacts certain affective styles. Understanding a particular body, then, presupposes familiarity with the respective style. Such familiarity is achieved through a history of interacting in the relevant socio-cultural contexts. Moreover, social perception is facilitated by current interaction which provides the necessary cues for understanding a particular individual in a specific situation. Coming back to the issue of shared feelings, my thesis is that these interactive dynamics, granted that they enable the perception of what others feel, also enable the sharing of feelings. The following section will further elaborate on how this is the case.

Feelings, mutual incorporation, and interaffectivity

Before proceeding with this last step, let me provide a brief synopsis of the previous three parts. The thrust of the argument developed in this paper rests on the notion of the *feeling body*, i.e., the idea that a feeling is directed towards an object or event in virtue of being enacted in a body that is embedded in a world. In other words, the world-directedness of a feeling is based on the embeddedness of the *feeling body* into the world. According to this view, the body needs to be understood in an intransitive or adverbial sense. It is not the object of a feeling, but the medium that *does* the feeling. Feelings usually do not involve an awareness of the body, but bodily awareness of the objects and events towards which the feeling is directed. The corresponding understanding of the *bodiliness of feelings* suggests that feelings are enacted in the

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psycho-physically neutral unity of the expressive body. This constitutes the perceivability of feelings, making comprehensible how the feelings of others can be encountered in their bodies.

The aim of this last part is to show how such a rethinking of the connection between feelings and the body also implies the *shareability* of feelings. In particular, I will focus on the processes of bodily interaction relevant to such a notion of shared feelings. In a jointly written paper, Fuchs and De Jaegher suggest that these interactive processes can be seen “as a *dynamical coupling and coordination of embodied agents*” from the perspective of enactivism, and “from a phenomenological point of view as *mutual incorporation*.”⁵⁵ In my reconstruction, I will mostly use phenomenological terminology. Fuchs and De Jaegher follow Merleau-Ponty in presenting *incorporation* as a pervasive characteristic of the feeling body. Merleau-Ponty famously illustrates this with the example of a blind person experiencing her environment with the help of a cane: “The blind man’s cane has ceased to be an object for him, it is no longer perceived for itself; rather, the cane’s furthest point is transformed into a sensitive zone, it increases the scope and the radius of the act of touching and has become analogous to a gaze.”⁵⁶ For the visually impaired individual who is a veteran cane user, the cane is no longer an experienced object. Rather, it becomes *incorporated* into that individual’s body schema, like an additional limb. In other words, the cane becomes part of the experiencing body and thereby is transformed into a transparent medium of experience.

A similar experience can be made in the case of touch typing, when the fingers find the keys without the use of sight. For a veteran typist the keyboard becomes an

⁵⁵ Thomas Fuchs and Hanne De Jaegher, “Enactive Intersubjectivity: Participatory Sense-Making and Mutual Incorporation,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 8 (4) (2009): 470.

⁵⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 144.

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extension of her body, it is incorporated into her body schema, and when typing, she does not experience the keyboard, but is directed towards the letters on the screen.

Localizing the correct keys is achieved by muscle memory, the relevant knowledge is, so to say, in the fingers. This is evidenced by a number of simple observations. For example, many veteran typists will likely find it difficult to consciously recollect the location of keys. Or consider the irritation that typing on a keyboard with different language settings causes. Another little experiment is to focus on the keyboard while typing, which will likely disturb the typing flow. These examples illustrate what is meant by incorporation. When incorporated, an object becomes an extension of the feeling body, i.e., a transparent medium of experience.

Fuchs and De Jaegher suggest speaking of *mutual incorporation* in the case of a reciprocal interaction in which the involved bodies reach out to incorporate each other. In contrast to the incorporation of objects like the cane and the keyboard, the incorporation now deals with another feeling body, i.e., another perceptive and agentive center with autonomy. Thus, mutual incorporation involves “two ‘centres of gravity’ which both continuously oscillate between activity and receptivity.”⁵⁷ Fuchs and De Jaegher illustrate this with the example of eye contact. Based on an account of the feeling body, the gaze can be seen as another extension of the body, just like limbs, a cane, or a keyboard. This is why I can feel pushed or pulled by another’s gaze. I can feel touched by it, both tenderly and hurtfully. I may return a gaze or try to ignore it. The contact of gazes can be one of the most intense forms of social interaction, but it is also ubiquitous.⁵⁸ For example, avoiding each other’s gazes is a crucial mode of interaction in urban public transport, and urban dwellers are particularly skilled at it. One can easily

⁵⁷ Fuchs and De Jaegher, “Enactive Intersubjectivity: Participatory Sense-Making and Mutual Incorporation,” 476.

⁵⁸ Fuchs and De Jaegher, 474 f.

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overlook that avoiding eye contact is actually a complex process of coordination, in which the behaviors of the involved individuals continuously regulate each other.

Moving from the example of eye contact to mutual incorporation in general, we can say that in mutual incorporation, the bodies become sources of impact on each other. They reach out to each other and influence each other's behavior and experience, leading to "circular interplay of expressions and reactions running in split seconds and constantly modifying each partner's bodily state, in a process that becomes highly autonomous and is not directly controlled by the partners."⁵⁹ As Froese and Fuchs specify, the cues and reactions involved in this process likely proceed too quickly to be fully traced by conscious awareness, although we are usually aware of, or easily can become aware of, the overall process. Mutual incorporation involves processes of bodily resonance and affect attunement, and it is mediated through facial expressions, gestures, voice, etc., i.e., the whole expressive behavior of the body.⁶⁰

Fuchs coined the term *interaffectivity* to refer to such processes of mutual incorporation in the domain of affective life: "Our body is affected by the other's expression, and we experience the kinetics and intensity of his emotions through our own bodily kinesthesia and sensation. This means that in every social encounter, two cycles of affective intentionality [...] become intertwined, thus continuously modifying each subject's affective affordances and resonance."⁶¹ According to this model, the feelings of one body immediately affect other bodies, and thereby might elicit corresponding feelings in them. Those feelings might in turn affect the first body and

⁵⁹ Tom Froese and Thomas Fuchs, "The Extended Body: A Case Study in the Neurophenomenology of Social Interaction," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 11 (2012): 213.

⁶⁰ Froese and Fuchs, 212 f.

⁶¹ Thomas Fuchs, "The Phenomenology of Affectivity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry*, ed. K.W.M. Fulford et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 625.

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enhance her feelings. In such a way, *inter-bodily resonance* can lead to the convergence of feelings.⁶²

Sometimes, such inter-bodily resonance just amounts to the reciprocal modification of individual feelings. Hence, the notions of mutual incorporation and interaffectivity allow us to address the inter-bodily dynamics involved in the facilitation, modulation, and regulation of feelings, suggesting that the responsible processes are not just located “within” an individual’s body, but distributed across the interactions of an individual with its natural and social environment.⁶³ Sometimes, however, the connection generated by mutual incorporation can become so strong that the “in-between” becomes a new “center of gravity.”⁶⁴ Whenever this happens, the involved bodies “become parts of a dynamic sensorimotor and interaffective system that connects both bodies in *interbodily resonance* or *intercorporality*.”⁶⁵ One might want to describe cases in which mutual incorporation runs so deeply that the “in-between” becomes a new “centre of gravity” in terms of a *merging of perspectives*; perspectives merge into each other insofar as several individuals become co-subjects or collaborators who, against the background of a common world, experience the world from the same vantage point.⁶⁶ However, even in cases of mutual incorporation leading to the emergence of a new “centre of gravity,” individuals retain their autonomy as individuals. In line with dynamical systems theory, I maintain that if the autonomy of interactors were destroyed, the resulting system would not amount to a social interaction

⁶² Fuchs, “The Phenomenology of Affectivity.”

⁶³ Recently, the embeddedness and connectedness of the feeling body has been discussed in terms of extended or scaffolded affectivity. See Colombetti and Krueger, “Scaffoldings of the Affective Mind.”

⁶⁴ Fuchs and De Jaegher, “Enactive Intersubjectivity: Participatory Sense-Making and Mutual Incorporation,” 476.

⁶⁵ Fuchs, “The Phenomenology of Affectivity,” 626.

⁶⁶ Bennett W. Helm, “Plural Agents,” *Nous* 42, no. 1 (2008): 17–49.

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anymore.⁶⁷ I consider this equivalent to the claim of phenomenological approaches to shared affective experience stating that the self-other distinction is crucial for any meaningful sense of affective (or, for that matter, also cognitive) sharing. The conception of feelings being “shared” necessarily implies a plurality of participants who are aware of each other’s participation; and it also implies an awareness of experiencing the feeling *together*.⁶⁸ The notions of mutual incorporation, inter-bodily resonance, and interaffectivity allow one to further investigate how such awareness of plurality and togetherness come about in and through dynamics of bodily interaction.⁶⁹

It goes beyond the scope of this paper to discuss how this proposal relates to specific theories of shared emotions. What I have aimed to show is the following: if we understand the feeling body as constantly engaging in inter-bodily dynamics of mutual affecting and being affected, it enables us to understand how our bodiliness opens us up to the possibility of emotions being experienced together by a plurality of bodies.

Conclusion

The core aim of this paper has been to challenge intuitions about the nature of feelings and the body that are taken to suggest that shared feelings are impossible. The main thrust of my argument is a rethinking of the link between feelings and the body, building on enactive and phenomenological understandings of the body. My reconceptualization focused on three key concepts: most importantly, it featured the notion of the *feeling body* as a psycho-physically neutral expressive unity. This is accompanied by the idea that the body is usually not the object of a feeling, but rather

⁶⁷ De Jaegher and Di Paolo, “Participatory Sense-Making,” 492.

⁶⁸ Felipe León, Thomas Szanto, and Dan Zahavi, “Emotional Sharing and the Extended Mind,” *Synthese* 196 (2019): 4859; Thonhauser, “Shared Emotions: A Steinian Proposal,” 1008–12; Gerhard Thonhauser, “Shared Emotions and Collective Affective Intentionality,” *I Quaderni Della Ginestra* 22 (2018): 106–7.

⁶⁹ Thonhauser, “A Multifaceted Approach to Emotional Sharing.”

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the transparent medium doing the feeling. The corresponding understanding of the *bodiliness of feelings* means that feelings can neither be reduced to their mentality, nor to their physicality, nor to a combination of both; rather, feelings are enacted in the feeling body, and as such, they are both perceivable for others and shareable with others. Finally, I have discussed how feeling bodies constantly engage in dynamics of *mutual incorporation*, and how these dynamics can serve as the ground for the possible sharing of feelings.

If these reconceptualizations are plausible, then there is nothing mysterious about shared emotions. On the contrary, if emotions are ontologically grounded in ubiquitous dynamics of mutual incorporation, this suggests that the sharing of emotions beyond individual bodies is the norm rather than the exception. This points towards a new paradigm of understanding emotions in terms of their socio-relational and enactive nature. Emotions are not locked *inside* a body, but rather expressive enactments *of* a body; or more accurately, they are primarily enacted in the interaction *between* bodies.

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