

## The social and cognitive roles of sympathy

### Abstract

This article focuses on the role of sympathy and whether it can constitute what John Searle has so influentially labelled 'intentionality' on an inter-subjective level, namely a particular inter-directedness between individual members of a community, be it a political, a linguistic or any other type of community. If sympathy can be shown to provide the binding tissue of communities, then a sympathy-based and broader emotion-based social theory would be possible and plausible. Such a theory would be fundamentally methodologically different from a rationalistic approach that is prone to slipping into reductionism, be it the economic, functionalist or some other type of reduction that allows a neat ordering of principles. Sympathy contains something immediate, independent of a rational understanding, and thus, at least *prima facie*, could serve as a basis on which to build a systematic explanation of what seems to be the intuitive substance of social relations that can only secondarily be subsumed under rational theoretical categories. The article examines Max Scheller's mature discussion of sympathy in his fifth, enlarged edition of *The Nature of Sympathy* and examines the applicability of sympathy in a social and moral theory of human action, as well as the nature of sympathy as a psychological category.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Scheller, Searle, sympathy, inter-subjective relations, regionalism and state sovereignty, emotional infection, empathy and communal response, emotional identification, intentionality, social relations and roles.

### Sympathy as a 'social grammar'

Human relations, apart from being mediated by the various cognitive functions and causally explicable actions, including communications, exhibit in large part an immediacy that cannot be explained by rational reasoning. This is especially the case with the expressions of inner events in people which, more often than not, meet with an intuitive recognition by others. Certain signs given away by others allow us to be immediately certain that the other person is sad, revolted, excited or optimistic about something.

We have here, as it were, a universal grammar, valid for all languages of expression, and the ultimate basis of understanding for all forms of mime and pantomime among living creatures. Only so are we able to perceive the inadequacy of a person's gesture to his experience, and even the contradiction between what the gesture expresses and what it is meant to express.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 All references are to Scheller's *The Nature of Sympathy* translated by Peter Heath and edited by W. Stark, Routledge & Kegan Paul: London and Henley, 1979, with an introductory note to the Fifth Edition by Maria Scheller.
- 2 Scheller, p. 11.

This immediacy of recognition can be explained in various ways, but in all cases it clearly includes a pre-programmed element, a case of pre-existing knowledge about certain structures of spontaneity in expression even though we have never met these gestures and signs before. Clearly, the ability to understand the inner dynamics of the other requires a direct intuitive communication that begs standards of rationality, as those who recognise others' indistinct and often inarticulate gestures will often not be able rationally to explain how or why they understand them. This type of 'fellow feeling' (*Mitgefühl*), as Scheller calls it, or of sympathy, as we shall call it here, provides a high degree of transparency in communications and allows for a considerably greater intimacy between members of a community. Yet, the ability to feel sympathy cannot be construed rationally, nor can it be advanced by deliberate policies; it is simply a given in inter-subjective communications. This gift is being gradually lost as communities become larger and individuals in them more driven by various solitary agendas that push them further apart from the others. Thus, the exercise of sympathy is naturally more likely in small communities rather than large cities, much in the same sense as Aristotle believed that true direct democracy is possible in a small community of free people (the ancient Greek *polis*). The relative procedural sophistication of representative democracy as opposed to the direct one (exercised on the *agoras* in ancient times) comes at a cost: namely, the loss of immediacy in inter-subjective political communications and the rise of the rule-based validation of substantive decisions, along with marketing as a tool for securing a representative role for political actors. In a sense, if the *polis* was a small community of free people, for most modern democracies it would be correct to say that they are large communities of people who are not free but who believe that the system in which they live is the best possible.

Given that in large communities sympathy is more far-fetched than in small ones, the logical question to ask is to what extent large political communities can be reorganised so as to consist of a cluster of smaller communities. Each of these would maintain a large amount of transparency and solidarity through the exercise of immediacy in inter-subjective relations and would, at the same time, be mutually connected so as both to preserve their internal integrity and to provide for the sufficient cohesion of the entire large political system. In short, what one must ask is whether or not the quality of democracy depends on its internal structure and size.

The more difficult question, directly connected with this one, concerns the criteria that the sub-sets of the political system conforming to the ideal of a small community of free citizens would have to satisfy. Clearly, not all small communities would be modern *polises*: in some, the divergence of traditions, values, ethnicities and experiences between the various groups could generate even greater conflicts than are already evident in the broader political spectrums of existing modern democracies.

However, if sympathy is to determine the character of democratic relations in a society, then the basic building blocks of any democratic society would clearly have to be sufficiently small constitutive communities to be manageable and transparent, both institutionally and, significantly, emotionally. Perhaps people from community A may not be able to sympathise with those from community C in the same political system, but at least those within each of the communities should have a sufficiently close understanding of each other to be able to present a unified and articulate common view. This idea is much along the lines of European federalism, which is based

on the principles of regionalism and subsidiarity. The initial, today somewhat forgotten, idea of a 'Europe of the regions' had envisaged that, in a European community of nations, decisions would be made at the lowest possible level of the institutional hierarchy because the lower the decision-making institution, the closer it is to the relevant community that is immediately affected by the issue. The structure of such a Europe would be regional, and regions would delineate communities with similar geographic, economic, cultural and historic features.

The common political discourse about Europe has been much more focused on the issues of geographic enlargement and the principles of a single market and the supremacy of European law than it has on the very structural principles designed by the early European federalists.<sup>3</sup> This early regionalist theory encapsulates much of what is entailed by the philosophical idea that sympathy is the true functional principle underpinning democratic discourse and indeed, a participatory democracy in any feasible form.

Regionalism as a logical prerequisite for a functional social grammar?

The idea that small communities are the basic unit of a truly participatory social organisation has not been received without controversy; perhaps the most concrete initiative that illustrates this has been the initiative to found European integration on the idea of a 'Europe of the regions'.

The very idea of a 'Europe of the regions' is well summed up by Susana Borrás-Alomar, Thomas Christiansen and Andres Rodríguez-Pose, and this justifies a somewhat lengthy quote:

In fact, behind the idea of a 'Europe of the regions' lies the thought that subnational entities have little by little acquired greater protagonism in the political, economic, social and cultural arenas to the detriment of nation-states. The latter undergo a progressive erosion of their powers induced by two basic factors: on the one hand, the advances in European integration which limit the autonomous capacity of national governments to control their destinies independently; and, on the other hand, the greater dynamism of regional entities. (...) The regional dimension is (...) intended to reflect better the cultural and national divisions within Europe and, therefore, to tackle more adequately the problems left unsolved by the 'obsolete' national structure. In this context, the nation-state would play only a secondary linking role between those two centres. And, since the ultimate function of this role is superfluous, the concept of the nation-state as it is conceived now is due to perish in Europe in the long run.<sup>4</sup>

In the same study, the authors conclude that, given regionalism's inherent challenge to the sovereignty of nation states, it has decidedly failed to entrench itself in the politics and philosophy of the European Union. This outcome has been influenced by the widespread tendency of separatist movements to claim regionalist principles as a basis for their secessionist agendas and by a questioning of the authority of the na-

3 For an example of an overview of the evolution of the regionalist ideal, see Stephen George (1985) *Politics and Policy in the European Community* Oxford University Press: Oxford.

4 Susana Borrás-Alomar, Thomas Christiansen and Andres Rodríguez-Pose (1994) 'Towards a "Europe of the Regions"? Visions and Reality from a Critical Perspective' *Regional Politics and Policy* 4(2): 1-27.

tion state. The debate has thus been focused on the relationship between a regional structure of decision-making within a supra-national entity, such as the EU, and the ability of nation states within that entity to retain an optimum of jurisdiction over their territory. In this sense, the debate has decidedly veered off the trajectory along which a principled reasoning about regionalism as an element that facilitates participatory democracy ought to develop.

Regionalism as a contributing factor to sympathy as the social grammar of democratic societies is not in opposition to the sovereignty principle. Its focus is on local organisation that allows a transparent system for connecting the building blocks of a democratic society bottom-to-top, rather than on a large amount of traditionally state-attached competencies being divulged to local communities. In some European societies, such as in Belgium, regionalism indeed involves some of the traditional state competencies belonging to the regions (education policy, ground transport, airports, entering into international agreements, etc.), but these are rather extreme cases that are by no means required for a functioning principle of regionalism within sovereign democracies.

The logic of regionalism is distinct from the logic of the decentralisation of state authority, but these two principles are often confused. Decentralisation requires regions to be equipped by decision-making capacities that automatically reduce the power of the central state, but regionalism in the sense of contributing to a functioning social grammar does not require decision-making powers. The latter is compatible with relatively centrally-conceived systems of institutions because it is a structural principle that requires small communities, in which people can relate to each other, to be the basic unit in social construction but it does not require that powerful institutions need to be associated with such communities. A federal structure can be built without being federalist in the sense advocated by the European post-World War Two utopians, in which the views of the initial communities are gradually integrated through a fusing political process into outcomes that are articulated at the very top of the institutional hierarchy. As long as this process is transparent and fair, and no significant content arising from the input of the local communities is lost, state sovereignty is not under threat. This, after all, is the meaning of participatory democracy – it is not a democracy prone to fission through decentralisation, but one that is inclusive and that conceives of particular interests as connecting elements rather than the seeds of destruction and dissipation.

The main problem with regionalism as a threat to state sovereignty arises from its abuse as a tool with which to strive for the establishment of new sovereign states, rather than perceiving it as a necessary procedural element for democracies truly to meet the needs and views of most of their citizens. If the structure of a democratic political system is modular, and the modules are communities where people have no difficulty relating to each other emotionally, sharing sufficient concerns to understand each others' views, the role of the entire modular structure from the point of view of the sovereign state is that cumulative decisions taken at the centre are adequately informed. This, at the same time, does not preclude a degree of decentralisation of authority in the areas judged consensually to be best served by local authorities; after all, the latter is traditional practice in most present democracies, including highly-centralised ones.

## The functionality of sympathy in small communities

The functional reason for the principle ‘small is beautiful’ in the democratic context lies in that sympathy, which allows an immediacy in the perception and understanding of the viewpoint and basic interests of the other, does spring from a communal well of trust, whereas such trust requires a deeper set of commonalities than those typically associated with citizenship. The sovereign state produces citizenship as a form of a common identification of its constituents while smaller, organic communities have more comprehensive sets of mutual identifications that arise from a shared experience and immediate prospects that characterise people who live close to each other. Modern nation states tend to be multicultural, which is a cognitive benefit because various shared experiences can be exchanged and various traditions can benefit from each other, but this exchange happens in any case between communities, and much less so between individuals, because communities are the primary bearers of culture and tradition as manifestations of shared fundamental values.

One fundamental aspect of solidarity based on sympathy is the ability to identify with another throughout a political system, which allows the understanding of another’s point of view as well as a tolerance of it. Political mobilisation is always based on enthusing people to identify with a person (usually a leader) or a value (or goal). However, there is a fundamental difference between an amorphous mass of discrete individuals identifying with a leader and participatory input into collective decision-making mediated by organic, small communities as the immediate political constituents of decision-making institutions.

Individuals can identify with the leader in all sorts of inflammatory and pathological ways that Scheller calls ‘emotional infection’. Essentially, this is common in mass-psychology, where the human group acts similarly to a group of animals. Just as a herd becomes ‘infective’ by the suggestive moves made by several individuals, and can enter into a frenzy whereby these moves are internalised as their own panic, aggression or fight-or-flight instinct, so does a crowd internalise the emotions of the leaders, be they ‘national emancipators’, ‘freedom fighters’ or ‘protesters for justice’. Most cases of mass hysteria are induced by this type of pathological identification, where direct contact between individuals and far-removed leaders proves particularly dangerous.<sup>5</sup>

Emotional infection is pathological and is by no means the same as empathy, because it erases the boundary between the individual and another person. In emotional infection, one does not sympathise with the feelings and views of the other; one does not even share the feelings and views of another – emotional infection allows the masses to feel as though the moves made by the leader are their own, to be forced into the oblivion of believing that what the leader believes or says is exactly what they believe and that what the leader proposes is, in fact, their own impulse. This can occur between a marginalised group of deprived people and a wealthy and powerful political leader through the tendency to identify with winners, even though there is practically no shared experience between the leader and the group. The reason lies in shared experience, a relatively deep set of commonalities, being required for true

5 Scheller, p. 12.

emotional communication and since emotional infection does not satisfy the criteria for communication – it is merely psychological contagion, as the name says.<sup>6</sup>

Ethical politics is very difficult where the possibility of exploiting mass psychology exists; smaller communities with truly shared interests and legacies are the cure for such abuses because they act as buffers in the way of populism, through the pre-articulation of the real interests and positions of true communities, prior to their becoming ‘ammunition’ in the usual political process through decision-making bodies. There are numerous other advantages to functional regionalism, apart from avoiding emotional infection in politics, such as the ability to reduce the influence of big business on the democratic process or a greater concern for the environment that can be longitudinally preserved in the political traffic once it is articulated by organic communities.

Small communities embody the commonalities required for sympathy as a social grammar, but the dynamic of sympathy does not require an excessive degree of interpersonal similarities within small communities and thus it retains a greater functionality in the context of a developed individuality in the modern world. This is evident from an empirical observation of the functioning of small communities in which both individual similarities and differences, eccentricities included, are known to most people but there is a fundamental ‘agreement to disagree’ on certain things. In such communities, there is usually a broadly-accepted respect for non-essential, individual differences that is based on shared fundamental commonalities, such as immediate life prospects and social, economic, environmental and other circumstances that affect all in the same way, as well as, more often than not, a gene pool which is shared by the majority. Complemented by long-entrenched customs and a consensually-adopted micro-culture, these are powerful catalytic factors for social interaction and co-operation.

Clearly, the small or organic community with authentic commonalities that supersede individual differences is a barrier to the use of mass-psychology in politics and a decisive contributor to a more transparent political process. In other words, all the mentioned facts about life in organic communities potentially add integrity in a political process in which the organic community would be incorporated as an unavoidable link in the chain of decision-making, even if the decision-making itself occurs at the end of the hierarchically-construed chain of institutions. It appears that this is the true participatory democracy from a structural point of view.

- 6 In Scheller’s words: ‘The process of infection is an involuntary one. Especially characteristic is its tendency to return to its point of departure, so that the feelings concerned *gather* momentum like an avalanche. The emotion caused by infection reproduces itself *again* by means of expression and imitation, so that the infectious emotion increases, again reproduces itself, and so on. In all mass-excitement, even in the formation of ‘public opinion’, it is above all this reciprocal effect of a self-generating infection which leads to the uprush of a common surge of emotion and to the characteristic feature of a crowd in action that it is so easily carried beyond the intentions of every one of its members and does things for which no one acknowledges either the will or the responsibility. It is, in fact, the infective process itself, which generates purposes beyond the designs of any single individual.’ (Scheller, pp. 15-16).

## **Sympathy and related phenomena**

Sympathy is but one of several closely-related psychological phenomena that suggest some type of shared sentiments, but it is essential to distinguish it from the other types. A little was said in the previous section about emotional infection. In addition to this phenomenon, Scheller distinguishes between 'a community of feeling', or shared feeling, and 'emotional identification'. Community of feeling implies that the same sentiment is shared by several individuals who all genuinely feel the same thing. Perhaps the simplest examples include common grief over the loss of a loved one, where all members of the family tend to feel the same.

Community of feeling is not particularly relevant to political dynamics, but emotional identification is closely related to the described emotional infection and it can play an important role in collective mobilisation. Emotional identification implies one's identity is either superimposed on another's, or is overwhelmed by the other, in ways known historically from the phenomena where people identified themselves with totems which could be specific individual animals, even rocks. Later, identification was translated to ancestors, before the beginning of the ancestor cult, which was a step away from full identification with the ancestors, a sign of liberation from identification, as it were. Namely, identification with ancestors meant that individual members of a tribe really believed that they are their ancestors (a common theme in the doctrine of reincarnation), while the cult of ancestors involved merely the veneration of ancestors as distinct from the venerating generation.

Emotional identification can take two forms, namely the idiopathic and the heteropathic: the idiopathic takes place when the actor takes on the identity of something or someone else (as in all the above-described examples); whereas the heteropathic occurs when the identity of the spectator, as it were, is 'sucked in', or overwhelmed, by the identity of the observed object. Heteropathic identification is particularly close to emotional infection and can, in fact, be a part of it since the ability to be 'infected' by another's emotion (or, more generally, intellectual or spiritual 'motion') is consistent with the ability of the other to 'take over' our own identity.

The latter type of identification is well-known from natural observation, particularly well illustrated in the examples of the rabbit or the squirrel meeting the gaze of a hungry snake and, rather than running away, becoming 'hypnotised' or overwhelmed by the snake and moving towards it, sometimes even literally throwing itself into the jaws. The prey thus identifies with the identity of the predator and 'establishes a corporeal identity' with the predator (in Scheller's own words) by throwing itself to certain death. The rabbit or the squirrel should have no trouble escaping the snake from anything but a distance of imminent strike. Such a distance is clearly not at stake in the described examples because, if the snake was so close as to strike immediately, it would have no need to 'hypnotise' the prey and neither would the prey have much room to move towards it before being grabbed. Thus, heteropathic identification must be a factor here and, perhaps, the key dynamic force behind it is the snake's overwhelming projection of appetitive desire.

Similar phenomena are known to exist in human relations, where 'strong personalities' with prodigious political desires, able to impose their wishes on others, cause 'weaker personalities', in fact most other people, to conform with those desires, sometimes to the extent of becoming their victims. Dominant husbands who abuse their wives for decades without being left by them and abusive politicians who cause



tragedies and yet win popular elections by those who suffer most from their decisions are perhaps equivalents to the example of the rabbit or the squirrel. Presumably, dominant personalities are also able to influence people to vote for them based on heteropathic identification which, then, is a perversion of what the democratic process is intended for. Numerous long-term presidents, prime ministers and rulers of other kinds might have imposed their will on voters in ways that did not rationally correspond either to the best interest of the voters or to any type of rational reasoning. In some parts of the world, there is an anecdotal principle that people 'will vote for whoever is currently in power', until things become extreme in ways that truly necessitate change at almost any cost. This 'electoral lethargy' has its psychological explanation and it may have more to do with social pathology of the described sort than any type of 'inherent voter conservatism'. Resistance to change is natural to a degree but in all extreme cases, or those that clearly suggest oblivion for what seems like evident own interest, heteropathic identification should be considered as a strong possibility.

A special case of identification throughout the group is 'identification through coalescence', which arises from the members of a community giving in to a certain common flow of feeling and instinctual sensibilities:

Whose pulse thereafter governs the behaviour of all its members, so that ideas and schemes are driven wildly before it, like leaves before a storm.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps this type of collective coalescence in each other's perceptions and feelings is responsible for the most radical types of domination over the masses by creating the conditions wherein the group will simply be so predictable that it will always be outsmarted by those in positions of power. Propositions based on mythological prejudice or on fear-mongering are particularly potent tools to generate pervasive coalescence with the purpose of political domination.

The last psychological phenomenon that needs to be distinguished from sympathy proper is 'anticipating identification', which is a sort of in-born capacity that degenerates in proportion with the development of civilisation: namely, the capacity to transgress the psychological and physical boundaries of an individual's integrity and anticipate the previously completely unknown structures and sensibilities of the other, often another species in the animal world, without ever having experienced such structures in the other. Examples of this phenomenon include the ability by wasps to sting other species, such as caterpillars, directly in the nerve centres that cause the caterpillar to become paralysed until the wasp can lay its eggs inside it, without killing the caterpillar. The wasp has no way of knowing the inner nerve structure of the caterpillar, nor has it ever before stung the caterpillar, yet it unmistakably hits the right spot. This pre-programmed way of interacting between the species might mean that:

Unquestionably, we must suppose the wasp to have some kind of primary 'knowledge' (in the widest sense of 'having') concerning the vital processes of the caterpillar.<sup>8</sup>

7 Scheller, p. 25.

8 Scheller, p. 29.



In the case of human interaction along this model, one is tempted to speak of 'instinct', or some reference to a supposed 'prior community', that may not be present in the individual, ontogenic experience of either partners in the interaction, but might be philogenically reproduced. Scheller believes this primitive mutual connectedness between sensibilities, and in the human context of minds, to be culturally highly valuable:

(...) to be aware of any organism as alive, to distinguish even the simplest animate movement from an inanimate one, a minimum of undifferentiated identification is necessary; we shall see how the simplest vicarious emotion, the most elementary fellow-feeling, and over and above these the capacity for understanding between minds, are built up on the basis of this primitive givenness of 'the other' (...).<sup>9</sup>

He argues that, if primitive organisms have this capacity, this must be so much more the case with different racial, ethnic and linguistic communities, each of which probably possesses its own fine instincts of identification and anticipation which, if properly arranged in a multicultural society, can immensely enhance the epistemological and generally cognitive capacity of that society to achieve its goals. However, Scheller does not recognise the link between instincts arising from such deeper-seated commonalities and intentionality as a presupposition for conscious human relations, which was so potently analysed by John Searle. According to Scheller, intentionality is limited strictly to the domain of cognition and is characteristic only of human beings.<sup>10</sup>

On the one hand, it is true that intentionality in communication is directed predominantly towards the cognitive realm of human activities. One of the most well-researched examples is the ability to understand mistaken utterances in their intended real meaning, even though in the literal meaning they may have quite a different object. Malapropisms, as they are called, are interpreted in various ways, many of which depend on contextual considerations and analysis while some arise from a sort of spontaneous, immediate recognition of a type that suggests evolutionary roots reaching back before human development. Donald Davidson has been among the first to discuss the epistemological consequences of understanding malapropisms.<sup>11</sup> In particular, he has pointed to the difference between conditions of understanding someone and the conditions of truthfulness of a proposition. The truth conditions for a statement might be clear and known to the listener as well as the speaker, but a mistaken statement which, by definition, does not satisfy the truth conditions for the intended statement will often be understood correctly by the listener. This could be explained by postulating a certain immediacy between the speaker and the listener, where the listener is able to 'coalesce' in the intentions of the speaker and understand his meaning regardless of what the utterance might actually turn out to be. In short, this is the problem of the understanding of malapropisms in its cognitive dimension.

9 Scheller, p. 31.

10 Scheller, p. 32, footnote 2.

11 Donald Davidson (1986) 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' in R. Grandy & R. Warner (eds.) *Philosophical Grounds of Rationality: Intentions, Categories, Ends* Clarendon Press: Oxford, pp. 157-175.

We might or might not agree that intentionality in its essence is limited to conscious human relations (for why does it not apply to unconscious actions that might, in some cases, be quite compatible with conscious ones, or to the instincts of the wasp towards the spider or the caterpillar that are so perfectly pre-programmed so as to achieve a specific goal while allowing the victim to survive?), but our main interest here is in the realm of ethics of the political community and, thus, the human interactions to which there is agreement that intentionality applies fully.

Scheller insists in his analysis of sympathy that it is not *and should not be* an ethical argument; his ambitions are to develop a comprehensive behavioural explanation that could have its offshoots in the various disciplines on the concept of sympathy in its various forms analysed in detail.<sup>12</sup> He argues that ethics do not exhaust the overall explanatory potential of sympathy which, on his account, goes as far as Henry Bergson's attempts in his 1907 *Creative Evolution* to explain nature by a more or less universal 'vital instinct' or 'vital force' (*élan vital*). Scheller makes clear parallels with Bergson in his writing.<sup>13</sup> In this, he is quite cynical about instincts, arguing that the more one identifies with others, the more of an animal one becomes; while the more the individual is independent from primal collectivities, the more of a human being one becomes.

This is a common sentiment in the context of evolutionary theory but this context is significantly different from that of collective action in politics, which is a narrower field with somewhat varied meanings of commonality and individuality than in evolutionary considerations. Individuation is a road of individual development from the amorphous evolutionary mass – at least this is how evolution theory sees it – but, assuming that the context is a relatively highly evolved human individual whose main problem is a limited ability to influence political processes and make valid moral judgements within them, the values cast on the discussion tend to be different. This is especially so when intentionality is concerned, for intentionality, apart from possessing indubitable evolutionary and epistemological value, as is clear from the analysis of malapropisms, is also a well of ethical questions. What Scheller says about identification and the various forms of mutual pre-directness between individuals has a considerable amount to do with the more contemporary discussions of intentionality in human communications. Furthermore, Scheller's concept of sympathy as fellow-feeling, that requires both a distinct identity between those with whom one sympathises and an ability to generate an emotional 'bridge' towards them, might be the key to unlock issues of intentionality in the inter-subjective, broadly speaking 'political' realm. We shall thus devote some attention to intentionality as a feature of the political and social discourse.

## Intentionality

By 'intentionality' is meant a primary 'directedness' of certain mental states and actions towards certain points of reference, namely the essential feature of some mental

- 12 'We nevertheless reject from the outset an 'Ethics of Sympathy' *as such*, holding as we do that the problem of sympathy in general has aspects and affinities which simply cannot be reached at all by a one-sided analysis and consideration from a purely ethical point of view' – Scheller's 'Preface to the Second Edition': p. xlvii.
- 13 e.g. Scheller, p. 28-9.

states that they are ‘about’, or ‘of’, something. Clearly, all communication is, by definition, intentional in this sense. Intentionality does not necessarily involve an intention to do something, it merely involves thoughts, beliefs or other mental phenomena being defined as hinged to an objection that they are about or of. Fear or hope are intentional, but they do not necessarily include intentions to do anything. According to Searle, there are mental states that are not intentional, because they are not defined by a specific object, such as nervousness or anxiety that do not relate to particular causes or reasons. Even within certain classes of mental phenomena, there are instances that are intentional and those that are not.

For example, just as there are forms of elation, depression and anxiety where one is simply elated, depressed, or anxious without being elated, depressed or anxious about anything, so, also, there are forms of these states where one is elated that such and such has occurred or depressed and anxious at the prospect of such and such. Undirected anxiety, depression and elation are not Intentional; the directed cases are Intentional.<sup>14</sup>

It is not at all obvious that Searle is correct in the assertion that some mental states are not intentional in the described sense just because they appear not to be caused by or be about a particular object. Unless the anxiety or depression are pathological, it is at least possible that they are caused by or referenced to a particular expectation, prospect or experience but that the subject is not conscious of this causation or referential point, resulting in the mental states appearing to be ‘about nothing’. This is not essential for the characterisation of intentionality for our purposes here, but it is potentially important for the issue of whether the entire human mental activity is ‘social’ or whether there is a part of it that seemingly serves no communications purpose and that does not arise from human relationships with objects, be they worldly or ideational. The issue itself is anthropologically crucial.

Intentionality is clearly present in any discourse and thus in any type of sociability or intersubjectivity, particularly in political sociability. Communication is mediated by a language, whether it is conceived as a grammatical language consisting of words and utterances, a language of signs or some other type of symbolic communication, but the relationship between language and rational symbolisation on the one hand and intentionality on the other comes up as the next issue. It was mentioned earlier in the text that Scheller had protested against using the term ‘intentionality’ to describe any features of intersubjectivity in the animal world as he believed intentionality to be an exclusive feature of human rational inter-relationships. Searle has a more radical and a seemingly more justified view of intentionality:

By explaining Intentionality in terms of language I do not mean to imply that Intentionality is essentially and necessarily linguistic. On the contrary it seems to me obvious that infants and many animals that do not in any ordinary sense have a language or perform speech acts nonetheless have Intentional states. Only someone in the grip of a philosophical theory would deny that small babies can literally be said to want milk and that dogs want to be let out or believe that their master is at the door. There are, incidentally, two reasons why we find it irresistible to attribute Intentionality to animals even though they do not have a language. First, we can

- 14 John Searle (1983) *Intentionality* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, p. 2. All references to Searle are to this work.

see that the causal basis of the animal's Intentionality is very much like our own, e.g., these are the dog's eyes, this is his skin, those are his ears, etc. Second, we can't make sense of his behaviour otherwise.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, it seems irresistibly intuitive to attribute intentionality to animals as well as people, as it does to consider them capable of 'believing', 'fearing' or 'wanting'. That a person wants a promotion does not appear to be structurally different from a dog's wanting to play in the garden, despite the human's rationality that is postulated as his *differentia specifica* from the dog. The wasp does not have the rationality of a human being, yet it displays clearly intentional, or 'directed', behaviour when it stings the spider or caterpillar so as to paralyse and then lay eggs in them. The snake is not rational, but its hungry gaze whilst hunting is so much intentional that its brutal 'appetitive force' overwhelms its prey to the extent that it willingly allows itself to be caught and eaten. Intentionality as directedness, a fundamental partial determination of mental states by the object, is such a vital part of life generally that it comes close to Bergson's *élan vital*. In this sense, it is compellingly intuitive to conclude, with Searle, that:

[L]anguage is derived from Intentionality and not conversely,

and, perhaps more radically, that rationality might well spring from a more primal intentionality than *vice versa*.

For human beings, intentionality is undisputed as a feature of political and ethical life and, in fact, all norms of both are premised on it. What is more controversial are the types of intentionality included in intersubjective human relations. If mental states tend to be intentional (with or without the certain exceptions mentioned by Searle), then the mental landscape of social discourse determines all phenomena within the existing political systems. In other words, if the mental undercurrent of social and political life is overwhelmingly intentional and directed towards objects or ideas, then the way in which this intentionality is shaped (whether it is constructive or destructive, friendly or adverse to others, premised on acquisitive or contemplative views of material objects, etc.) fully determines politics among other types of human sociability. The question to be asked concerns the ways in which intentionality may be influenced as a fundamental feature of human relations and thought so as to enhance certain values and discourage others, to improve certain types of mental dispositions and block others – in short, whether and how the premise of intentionality can be used morally to guide and educate political communities.

If the wasp owes its ability to paralyse and exploit other insects in the way described to a primal intentionality, which may include certain types of innate know-how, it is more than possible that other species also have capacities (in the human case considerably degraded by social evolution) for various exploitative and other relationships with other individuals and species. Unlike the wasp or the dog, the human being has a far greater ability freely to choose which of these capacities to develop and which ones to sanction and block systematically. Social sentiments belong to a special class of intentional mental phenomena that may take wildly different direc-

15 Searle, p. 5.

tions, from social co-operation and cross-identification across a number of the other members of the community to exploitative or genocidal intentions. History provides a sufficiently vivid illustration of particularly the latter type of mental disposition.

Given this disproportionately high ability to control or cultivate intentionality – in fact this is what we call ‘rationality’ – the human being begins to qualify as a political subject. Bees tend to exhibit mainly constructive intentionality towards each other, but have no such freedom to control and direct it and thus the talk of ‘bee societies’ is merely biological language. Bees are no more rational than are wasps, although their mutual intentionality tends to be radically different and, at least superficially, infinitely more agreeable than that of wasps. Neither species is aware of its own intentionality and has no ability to cultivate particular streams and aspects of it.

Having said all this, liberal and communitarian social paradigms, as extremes, appear as clear examples of two alternative types of social intentionality that can be systematically cultivated by ideology, social instruments, the intelligentsia, the media, and the political class. This cultivation is not merely institutional or a matter of tradition, as political philosophy in large part would like us to believe, but inherently deliberative and psychological; its bearers are those who wield influence on the structural and strategic development of societies – perhaps most of all the intellectual class which provides both the ideological and moral guidance for political systems.

The reason for this particular responsibility of ideologues for the shaping of social intentionality is again reflected in a distinction made by Searle between the ‘assertive’, ‘commissive’ and ‘directive’ classes of speech acts. The first of these includes propositions, descriptions or statements which are characterised by truth or falsity; the second includes vows, promises and the like; while the third involves orders, instructions, directions and commands. The latter two types of speech acts are characterised by the changes that they produce in the world rather than truth or falsity. The former is evaluated by what Searle calls the ‘word-to-world direction of fit’ (a statement is true, at least according to one theory of the truth, if the words match the reality in the world to which they refer), whereas the latter is characterised by a ‘world-to-word direction of fit’ (an order is not true or false, but either fulfilled – matched by a change in the world – or not).

Similar features apply to intentional states, such as beliefs (belief-to-world direction of fit), desires or hopes (world-to desire/hope direction of fit). Beliefs can be true or false, but fears or wishes cannot; beliefs may or may not fit the world, but the world either fits or does not fit desires or hopes. One has not made a mistake by hoping or fearing something that does not occur, but one does make a mistake in believing to be the case something that, in fact, is not. Political ideologies often refer to ‘beliefs’ (and beliefs are typically expressed linguistically in propositions or statements) but, in fact, these are permeated with value judgements and dispositional intentional content that is expressed in directional and commissive language. This is so much so that it is more appropriate to ask about the prescriptive force and effects of ideologies than about their truth or falsity. The real question is not whether liberalism is more or less true than communitarianism, as both are prescriptive political doctrines, but whether their values and the changes they produce in the world are beneficial or not, as well as whether they are sufficiently capable of bringing about the changes that they envisage.

What Alfred Tarski has called the truth conditions behind propositions – namely, the objective conditions under which a statement can be considered to be true (correspondence with reality, coherence or any other criterion envisaged by the various theories of truth, crudely speaking) – is equivalent to what might be considered such ‘conditions of effectivity’ for ideologies as directive and performative (according to Searle, ‘commissive’) intentional content. The conditions of plausibility are different for liberalism and communitarianism, for example, in that liberalism is effective if individual liberty – in politics, society and the economy – is adequately preserved by institutions whose main aim is to maintain the efficiency of social transactions in the broad sense while, at the same time, keeping the state at bay in its inherent tendency to encroach on individual liberties. Communitarianism is effective if the actual culture of a society is based on a primacy of collective goals and if individuals are raised and appraised in their social role primarily through the consideration of their capacity to contribute to collective projects. Republicanism, on the other hand, is effective if certain criteria envisaged by the various branches of the republican doctrine (most recently, citizenship) are actually the focus of the distribution of rights and privileges within a society. None of the political ideologies are true or false; they signify practical choices for coherent forms of social organisation and a set of cogent social values.

One particular issue to be addressed is the need to couch ideologies within ethical prescriptions, for there appears to be few other possibilities with which to compare them, apart from their supposed inner ability to contribute to the efficiency of certain functional aspects of social life. Ideologies cannot be true or false, but they must be able to be categorised as more or less morally justifiable or as practically conducive to better performance. Their frame of validation in the context of conditions of effectiveness is a ‘world-to-ideology’ fit; however, their conditions of moral justifiability are a kind of ideology-to-higher-level-value fit. If ideologies are primary level discourses that bear on the world or reality with greater or lesser effectiveness, then moral values surely must be second-order judgements or discourses that allow an appraisal of the ideologies in terms of their directive or performative intentional content.

This is similar to any other performative content; I may desire political power to such an extent that it overpowers my loyalty to my family or immediate neighbours, while whether or not my desire is effective will depend on the extent to which the world allows me to satisfy it. It is neither true nor false. However, as a primary-order discourse, or ‘language’, it may be judged as morally justified or unjustified. In such a case, it will be judged only through outside reference to moral values such as loyalty, modesty, respect for others, self-restraint, etc.

Intentionality, contrary to what Scheller held, is not exclusive to human beings but only in human beings does it become subject to moral judgements because of the freedom of humans considerably (if not completely) to control intentional impulses and intentional content. The snake’s intentionality in projecting appetitive force to the rabbit or the squirrel does not fall under a moral metre, but a man’s unrestrained appetitive desire for career advancement or political power does. Intersubjectivity is, as has been shown, intentional in the broad sense of the directedness of mental states and acts, and, as such, it is wholly subject to moral judgements apart from in some exceptional cases where personal freedom to choose can be reasonably denied.

It should be quite uncontroversial that intentional content, coupled with human freedom, is subject to moral judgements while the way that this judgement unfolds

depends on the sort of values selected for a particular type of morality. I have argued that sympathy may well be the emotional foundation of social interactions in a well-ordered society. This is a functional assertion. Scheller has shown quite convincingly that the various forms of 'sympathy' also serve cognitive purposes some of which, in the various species, are not conscious. This can be illustrated by numerous examples, but what is really interesting here is to examine sympathy's normative potential in the ethical field. Are there reasons morally to prefer certain types of normative languages (including that of sympathy) to others in judging political ideologies? I shall devote the remainder of this article to that issue, focusing on the linguistic and psychological analysis of what normative languages, or normative grammars (the two terms are used interchangeably here), imply for a social and political system.<sup>16</sup>

### **Intentionality and intersubjectivity**

If it is true to say that various propositions or beliefs which, according to Searle, have a word-to-world direction of fit (essentially conforming to the 'correspondence theory of truth', which implies that a proposition is true if and only if it corresponds with the real state of affairs in the world 'out there') are validated by certain truth conditions, what, then, of intentional content such as desires or orders? They do not express propositional content and thus cannot have truth conditions attached to them. My desire to own a Volvo truck is neither true nor false – it is either realised in the world, or it is not. Intentional content thus has conditions of satisfaction, rather than truth conditions, and they depend on a number of circumstances some of which at least are beyond the control of the person whose intentional content it is.

When social relations are at stake, intentional content precedes the entire history of political changes in any country. The hopes, plans, intentions and dreams of those who have helped shape revolutions, modernisations or plunges into dictatorship over time have played a unique role in the actual unfolding of such developments. The directions of intentionality, or prevailing intentionality, of a particular time in a particular society are thus crucial for the nature of events in that society. In addition, the sort of culture fostered by popular education and by the unique role played by political and social elites in framing mindsets in society is based on the conditioning and building of particular types of intentional content.

Assuming that intentional content (such as intentions or hopes) consists of various representations that do not necessarily become realised, they are decidedly psychological phenomena. They depend not only on whether or not they are realised but also on other representations, beliefs, knowledge or impressions with which they generate networks. In order to decide to own or to have an intention to drive a Volvo truck, I

- 16 'Social system' includes the set of norms, institutions and habits that constitute a particular culture in the development of mutual relations in a society. 'Political system' is a set of institutions and customs that govern the distribution and exercise of political power. In some cases, it is justified to speak of, for instance, the 'democratic social and political system' but the two are not necessarily consistent as there are institutional democracies with extremely exclusionary or authoritarian social systems and cultures, while there are quite co-operative and open social systems framed by particularly brutal and authoritarian political systems of the time. Social systems tend to be more longitudinally stable in their normative content than political systems.



must first know that there are such things as trucks and that Volvo is a factory that makes particular trucks, as well as some at least very general facts about the trucks in order to like them and to desire to own or drive one. If I was a medieval knight, I would hardly be able to desire to drive a Volvo truck because the rest of my mental representation network would not give rise to such intentional content. In addition, I must have certain capacities such as the ability to sit, move my feet and hands, see signals and obstacles, and perform a myriad of other small things involved in acts such as purchasing and driving a truck. Only against the background of such abilities, of which I must be conscious in myself, alongside the whole context of other representations and other intentional content, can I form the desire to drive a truck and, more specifically, to drive a Volvo truck.<sup>17</sup>

If my intentional content is benevolence towards other members of my political community, sympathy towards them and the desire to assist them, then it depends on a complex set of other representations and abilities. This is where we arrive at the critical terrain that must be crossed to arrive at social solidarity and a non-liberal concept of political freedom.

The desire to drive a truck or ride a horse can only be formed if one is familiar with some of the features of either that one could like. One also needs to be aware that one would actually be able to perform the action one desires should one be given an opportunity to do so. This is clear enough. However, it is far less clear that, for a political subject to desire to sympathise with other members of one's community, certain preconditions need to be fulfilled that are not unlike those concerning the desire to ride a horse. One needs at least to be familiar with what it would roughly be like to sympathise with others and one must be aware that one is actually able to do so. In addition, one would need to be aware of certain good effects of sympathy that could translate into a desire to sympathise with others. In order for these preconditions to be fulfilled, in other words, a certain culture needs to pre-exist in the society in which one is raised such that various options are actually available: both the liberal way of looking at social relations; and the more communitarian ways of appraising one's social roles.

It is often argued today that people brought up in contemporary America or in Britain do not actually have the experience of communitarian relations that would allow them to desire to demonstrate certain desirable attitudes towards others, such as benevolence or sympathy. A child born into a cut-throat neo-liberal society such as those two, with its strong rhetoric of meritocracy built into the selection and grading systems at school, in the political system and the way in which political campaigns are run, will simply not have a 'fair go' at even being able to adopt different views on society. The pedagogical role of the political system is often severely underestimated. Just as the political elites essentially disseminate attitudes and values to the citizens (and I have discussed this elsewhere with special reference to one particular area of social policy with ethical implications, namely penal policy<sup>18</sup>), so does the po-

17 Searle simply refers to the contextual representations and intentional content described here as 'The Network' and to the background abilities as 'The Background' – Searle, pp. 20-25.

18 In my *Punishment and Restorative Crime-Handling: A Social Theory of Trust* Ashgate: Aldershot, 1995.

litical system raise citizens. If this political system is ideologically crude and strongly favours one of the several competing political philosophies as its anchor, then naturally the citizens born in that system are likely to be hard core liberals whether they know this or not.

There is both a cognitive element in this pedagogy and a volitional element that depends on the capacities of the sort described. On the one hand, for a liberal citizen, and by this I mean the citizen of a country where the everyday discourse, primarily relating to responsibility for success, is based on the notion of meritocracy and on the individual's relative freedom from interference from the state, to understand what it is to possess freedom that is not based on a lack of interference requires some prior knowledge and experience of communitarian communities. For example, a young American Jew who has spent time on an Israeli kibbutz will be able to appreciate communitarian relations to a considerably greater extent than someone without such experience. People tend to identify with the circumstances in which they live and for them to be able to form a specific desire to live in different circumstances, or to form an attitude towards a political philosophy that is remote from that inherent in the political system in which they live, they need considerable education. In addition to these cognitive requirements, they also need to be convinced that they would actually be able to fulfil different requirements arising from a different set of social relations, and that prospect naturally arouses fear in all of us. In short, to understand essentially different types of social relations fully, one needs deliberate encouragement from the system, for which a certain inbuilt tolerance of difference is required. It is not at all sure that modern liberal systems are equipped with this 'switch' that allows sufficient ideological differentiation.

The pedagogical role of the system can be appropriately compared to the role of language and to the learning of languages. If the language one speaks is very easy and sufficiently pervasive to get by without having to learn other languages, then an individual is likely to have low motivation to learn other languages. To have an attitude towards other languages, one must be able to appreciate their qualities. For an English speaker to like French, one needs to have heard French often enough to appreciate, for example, its melodic character, to grow to like its pronunciation and to wonder whether there are situations and contexts of meaning where French is able structurally to 'catch' meanings in more elegant or perhaps more precise ways than English. This is still not enough for someone to form a desire to learn French. To do so, one would need both to like the language, to have a personal motive to invest time and energy, and also to be aware that one is most probably able to accomplish the task. If I have spoken Serbian all my life, it is by no means clear to me that I can, for example, learn Polish. For me to form a desire to learn Polish or French, I need to be fairly confident that, should I decide to do so and should there be an adequate opportunity (schooling, time to be spent in one or both the respective countries), I would have sufficient capacities to accomplish the task.

The desire does not depend on the actual existence of the capacities. I need to be sure that I can learn Polish, for I can be confident that I could do so, and then, in the course of learning, discover that I in fact cannot learn it because my cognitive, communicative, physical or intellectual capacities are insufficient for the task. However, in order to form the desire, I must be fairly confident that the capacities are there.

What are the social conditions for these cognitive and volitional preconditions to be met for me to learn a foreign language? Firstly, learning foreign languages should be a desirable endeavour in the community, unlike learning the skill of picking locks, for example. Secondly, some people in the community should be able to speak other languages in a way that enthruses others to learn to do the same, similar to athletes' performing to their peak being able to motivate thousands of others to try to pursue sports to the limit of their abilities. Finally, the general intellectual abilities of the population should be sufficient to witness a substantial number of people successfully learning languages which, again in turn, would encourage potential learners to embark upon the process.

It is, of course, possible for one to learn a foreign language even in a highly discouraging community, the same as it is possible for one to become a top runner in a community of the extremely obese which does not invest in or encourage sports, but these are exceptions to the rule. Similarly, it is possible to be a socialist or a communitarian in a dominant liberal society, or to be a liberal free-market theorist in a communist dictatorship; examples have been known, albeit only for the reason of being such stark exceptions to the rule. Normally, an encouraging environment, the existence of positive examples and both tolerance and encouragement of intellectual diversity would produce better philosophers and freer choices of political ideologies among the lay public. The general culture and atmosphere in society, which is designed by the political and intellectual elites, largely determines the extent to which the constituents will be able to exhibit certain skills and diversity of intellectual outlook. The individual responsibility for the choices made is thus substantially curtailed by the limitation of factually, truly free choice. I may be able to make a procedurally free choice, but the extent to which my choice is substantively free is much more difficult to determine because it depends on an array of influences and normative restrictions in my community, many of which may be only implicit and thus not conscious at all times.

In short, despite their ability to perceive causal relations and to generate insights beyond the realities immediately presented to them, people are overwhelmingly susceptible to suggestion as well as being conditioned by the various forms of social control, both formal and informal, with regard both to what is forbidden and, more importantly, to what is undesirable or at least considered less valuable than other avenues of action. The meaning of leadership and the responsibility of leaders is almost exhausted in this role of generating norms of what is and what is not desirable and influencing others in one's community with regard to how they ought to think about common dilemmas and what things they ought to value over other things.

The directive intentionality that is thus generated by leaders concerns both things that one should desire as well as the relationships with others into which one should enter. A leadership that fosters economic efficiency and deliberate breakdowns in sympathy with those who fall through the economic nets, for the sake of maintaining the pace of development and the speed of transactions, will naturally generate a reluctance among constituents to empathise with unfortunate members of the community and a propensity to explain away economic and other related misfortunes as a necessary by-product of prosperity. Sympathy, on the other hand, thrives in communities that are drawn close together, either by the existence of a powerful outside threat (such as the Israeli or Palestinian communities in the middle east today) or by a strong

interweaving of values and personal relationships that overrides individual considerations of comparative advantage and competition. In either case, the elites are the ones who command the values of the community.

Discursive theories of political systems attempt to dissect their mechanisms by breaking them down into modes of communication. Their starting principle is that almost everything we do in public is intersubjective and, thus, that intentionality is essentially intersubjective in human society. Most of the things we do in the everyday public space is either deliberately directed towards others (such as my writing of this article) or at least counts on the existence of others as a background assumption (such as my crossing the street carefully in order not to be run over by a speeding car). In this broad sense, the socially relevant part of our intentionality may well be entirely intersubjective. However, intersubjectivity does not mean sociability, nor does it imply in any way that we will relate to others constructively. My intersubjectivity might be based on a primary awareness of the existence and activities of others around me, of their rights and social entitlements, but I may see them as potential sources of interference with my goals, envisaged as essentially solitary interest-driven projects, while my entire intersubjective activity might be directed as disabling those potential interferences. In other words, I can be fully intersubjective while most of my intentional content might either arise from, or be directed at, broad projects to protect and distance myself from others. In doing so, I may use various strategies, including extreme friendliness or politeness, even forms of temporary co-operation, but the deciding criterion for the assessment of the character of my strategy and the particular actions contained in it will be the motivation and the values involved.