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### Commentary on

### **Katja Crone's *Self-consciousness, Interaction and Understanding Others***

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Traditional approaches to social cognition, in particular the theory-theory (TT) and the simulation theory (ST), have recently come under attack by proponents of an alternative approach that focusses on direct perception and interaction (referred to here as interaction theory (IT)). On this alternative approach, social cognition is to be understood neither in terms of theorizing about the mental states of others, nor in terms of simulating them. Rather, we can directly perceive the emotions, intentions, and thoughts of others. The notion of direct perception, in turn, is closely related to our ability to interact with others. In her fascinating paper, Katja attempts to shed light on the notion of interaction in play in those alternative approaches. In so doing, she also aims to elucidate the relation between self-consciousness, social cognition and intersubjectivity. What makes the paper particularly interesting and original is the fact that the proposal that she develops is based on arguments that are not usually brought to bear in this debate, namely those developed by Fichte.

Let me begin by saying that I am very sympathetic to an account – such as the one presented by Katja – that views the relation between self-consciousness and intersubjectivity as being symmetrical. I also think that an appeal to arguments from philosophical traditions that are not usually considered in these debates, in this case the tradition of German Idealism, is extremely promising and has the potential to add much to the discussion. Further, I agree with Katja that much more needs to be said about the role of interaction in social cognition, and that many authors in the relevant debates run the risk of simply taking the notion for granted.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Though De Jaegher (2009), among others, does try to give an account of it.

In fact, much more could also be said about the notion of direct perception and about the relation between interaction, direct perception, and social cognition in IT, and my hope is that we will touch on these issues in the further discussion during the conference. For instance, it is unclear whether Gallagher sees the notion of interaction as primary, or whether his idea is rather that the notion of direct perception is basic for our understanding of the possibility of interaction (and, in turn, social cognition). While claims such as that my abilities to directly perceive the mental states of others “is already informed by my own interaction with them and others” (2008, p. 540) and that “what we call social cognition is often nothing more than social interaction” (ibid.) suggests the former, it seems that he takes direct perception to be providing the basis for social cognition and interaction, rather than the other way around, when he states that “direct perception, etc, *delivers* what I need to interact with others most of the time” (ibid, emphasis mine). De Jaegher is more clear on taking the former view when she argues that “we may experience an other’s feelings and intentions directly, but direct perception builds on something, namely on skillful interaction with others” (2009, p. 538). Katja also seems to think that the notion of interaction is the primary one; hence her focus on interaction as a requirement for social cognition.

In the first part of her paper Katja argues that interaction should not be understood as real-time face-to-face interaction in all cases. Rather, we should see it as a defining feature of taking a certain stance towards others. In the second part of her paper she seeks to further clarify what it means to take such a stance by appealing to Fichte’s approach to intersubjectivity and self-consciousness.

My commentary will focus on the second part of Katja’s paper. While I found her appeal to Fichte extremely interesting, I want to raise a worry with regard to her project of shedding light on the notion of interaction (setting aside the notion of direct perception) in terms of taking an interpersonal stance towards another agent. In particular, I wonder to what extent the notion of an interpersonal stance in Fichte’s sense is really compatible with Gallagher’s and others’ notion of interaction, and the role it plays in IT. More specifically, I worry that the notion as Katja introduces it is too demanding to be seen as

an elucidation of the kind of interactions that Gallagher and others appeal to in their accounts.

According to Katja, the ability take an interpersonal stance towards another is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of social cognition (p. 5). Following Fichte, taking an interpersonal stance is to be understood as recognizing the other (and oneself) as a self-conscious and free agent. Moreover, this recognition is not only to be understood as theoretical, but rather as a way of treating the other. This is where interaction enters the picture, as characterizing “an attitude that entails that they [persons] mutually acknowledge and *treat* each other as self-conscious and free agents” (p. 7, emphasis mine). It is only by adopting this attitude (which is embedded in their practices of engaging with others) that they can make sense of each other *as* persons.

My worry is that although Katja takes this to be a basic requirement (perhaps to be complemented with theorizing and simulation to account for complex forms of social interaction), it is in fact rather demanding, and in particular more demanding than the kinds of interaction that proponents of IT have in mind. It would seem that the ability to recognize another as a self-conscious and free (rational) agent (similar to oneself) requires highly cognitive and conceptual abilities. For what could it mean to recognize another as a self-consciousness and free agent, and to be addressed as such by others? Not only does it seem to imply the ability to explicitly distinguish oneself from another, but also the ability to attribute particular mental states (i.e., representational states) to oneself and the other (i.e., the ability to meta-represent), as well as the ability to realize that the other, in turn, can ascribe mental states to her- and oneself (i.e., the ability to meta-meta-represent). For example, I need to be able to recognize that the other places certain expectations on me (demands, summons, or “Aufforderungen”), and which I can agree or disagree, comply or refuse to comply with, or that they are aware that I – as a free agent -, have certain intentions or place certain demands on them, which they can in turn approve or disapprove of. Even though, as Katja points out, Fichte’s account doesn’t necessarily require that the individual agents be consciously aware of doing so, it would nonetheless seem that complex cognitive and conceptual abilities need to be in place for agents to be able to take such an interpersonal stance. In fact, as Katja herself points out,

the interpersonal stance plays a central role in Fichte's account of *reflective* self-consciousness (as opposed to pre-reflective self-consciousness), which is to be understood in terms of having a *concept* of oneself as oneself (cf. p. 5).

In contrast, when we consider the kinds of interactions proponents of IT refer to in support of their theory, we are confronted with, for example, the ability to imitate facial expressions (which is an ability infants possess hours after birth), vocalization and gesturing, or joint attention. These types of interaction are arguably *nonconceptual* and do not require advanced cognitive abilities – which is precisely why they are used to argue against accounts of social cognition that rely on demanding cognitive abilities, such as inference or simulation skills (cf. Gallagher 2008, p. 538-9). Not only do they not require the ability to ascribe mental states to others and oneself (to meta-represent, or meta-meta-represent), or to possess a self-concept, but it is not even clear that they require the ability to explicitly distinguish between oneself and the other (as opposed to merely being able to *de facto* share a mental state with the other, or engage in a joint activity). This is even more obvious when we look at De Jaegher's description of interaction in terms of a coordination of movement (cf. 2009, p. 539). Here, not even a basic ability to distinguish between oneself and the other seems to be implied (at least not obviously so). Rather, it seems to be sufficient that two subjects engage in the process of coordinating their movements such as to form a coupled system, where this doesn't seem to require an awareness of the individual components of the system as such, let alone a mutual recognition as self-conscious and free agents.<sup>2</sup>

It might be argued that such basic forms of interaction do not yet qualify as forms of genuine self-consciousness and intersubjectivity in Fichte's sense (precisely because they do not entail that the agents are taking an interpersonal stance). But this then would only serve to further underpin the worry that the notion of interaction understood in Fichte's sense is different from the way the notion is used by proponents of IT.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that although many of the kinds of interactions that proponents of IT appeal to occur early in human development, the aim of IT is not just to make a claim about the ontogenetic development of social cognitive abilities. Rather, the claim seems to be that many of the basic and nonconceptual forms of social interaction that we find in infants and young children are still in play in adult human interactions as well (though the latter will also be informed by language, cultural context, narrative identities, etc.). That is to say that the claim seems to be that there are many forms of human social cognition, both in infancy and adulthood, that do not require complex cognitive and conceptual abilities. In contrast, the kind of human interaction Fichte seems to have in mind does seem to require such complex abilities.

Alternatively, perhaps an account of the ability to take an interpersonal stance could be given that is less demanding than the one I have sketched here, and that would be compatible with the notion of interaction in play in Gallagher's, De Jaegher's and others' accounts. If so, it would be very interesting to hear more about what such an account might look like.<sup>3</sup>

In sum, given that the kinds of interaction that proponents of IT seem to have in mind are rather primitive, and nonconceptual, my worry is that an appeal to Fichte's account of mutual recognition and acknowledgment as free and self-conscious agents is too demanding to shed light on the role of interaction in social cognition according to IT. It is not clear that such primitive forms of social interaction are best understood as being engaged in a process of mutual acknowledgment as self-consciousness and free agents. This is not to say that an appeal to the arguments developed by Fichte cannot illuminate important aspects of human social interaction (and shed light on how we should think about self-consciousness and intersubjectivity). However, on the face of it, the account proposed here seems to presuppose (and perhaps build on) many of the rather more basic social cognitive abilities that proponents of IT want to account for. It seems that it is only when we are in possession of certain, fairly demanding, social cognitive skills and concepts that we can recognize others as free and self-conscious agents (and let ourselves be addressed as such by them in turn).

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<sup>3</sup> For a Strawsonian account along such lines (albeit one that might still be too demanding for very basic types of social interaction) see Dow (2012).

## References

De Jaegher, Hanne (2009) "Social Understanding Through Direct Perception? Yes, by Interacting" (Commentary). *Consciousness and Cognition* 18, 535-542.

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