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The Skills of Perspective Taking

Nicolas Cuneen

Perspective taking plays a crucial role in social relations, just as it plays a central role in many contemporary social theories. The ability to “place oneself in another’s shoes” and see things from their point of view appears to be irreplaceable for democratic engagement, ethical reasoning and moral motivation, not to mention daily interactive coordination. Contemporary psychological approaches treat perspective taking as an innate capacity that emerges during determined developmental processes, or as an activity that, when engaged in, acts as a “simple panacea”¹, generating empathy, altruism, and a general feeling of connection with those whose shoes we put on – a beneficial blurring of self and other.

However, it is not clear that such a capacity exists as described, nor is it sure that intentional engagement in the activity of imaginatively simulating another’s mental states gets us any closer to understanding the other person in a way that person would recognize. As some simulation theorists have underlined², such activity may indeed backfire, either in the sense that it may actually prevent us from understanding the other, or that it may give way to defensive or aggressive postures.

Other theorists posit that true perspective taking is simply the practice of a certain kind of dialogue³, through which we can get closer to the other’s

¹ S. HODGES, B. CLARK, & M. MYERS, “Better living through perspective taking”, in R. BISWAS-DIENER, (ed.), *Positive psychology as social change*, Springer, Dordrecht/Heidelberg/London/New York, 2011, pp. 193-218, p. 194.

² C. SASSENATH, S. HODGES & S. PFATTHEICHER, “It’s All About the Self: When Perspective Taking Backfires”, in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 25, n°6, 2016, pp. 405-410.

³ J. MARTIN, B. SOKOL & T. ELFERS, “Taking and Coordinating Perspectives: From Prereflective Interactivity, through Reflective Intersubjectivity, to Metareflective Sociality”, in *Human Development*, vol. 51, 2008, pp. 294-317.

viewpoint by paying attention both to what they express and to the ways in which our own assumptions and biases color our perception of a given situation.

Between these images of innate capacities, simulative activities and dialogical practices, it is our hypothesis that perspective taking may be more fruitfully approached as a series of skills, certain combinations of which will be deployed in different situations involving interpersonal understanding. It is our hope that this approach will help appreciate the plural nature of the activity of perspective taking and the necessity to cultivate the skills involved, instead of counting on their spontaneous apparition. Furthermore, in line with the global educational shift towards skill outcomes over knowledge or performance outcomes⁴, we hope that such an approach might open up space in the classroom for what could be termed “identity skills” – tools for the development of a responsible and continually transformative relationship with oneself –, wherein the skills of perspective taking could make up a significant component, due to the tight link between openness to otherness and identity development.

Nevertheless, the language of skills may fall short of capturing the full range of what’s needed to both get closer to the other’s viewpoint and reflexively shift one’s own. Indeed, a form of attention paid to the fundamental transformability of the self – the ineliminable potential for every human to change their relationship with themselves – conditions the fruitful use of any skills aimed either at overcoming interpretative biases or at self-transformation. While people may develop healthy relationships with the object of belief that is the transformability of the self, framing the necessary attention toward this object as a trainable skill runs the risk of downplaying a crucial dimension of vigilance, as if the inculcation of a conscious or declarative belief could guaranty its mobilization at every junction.

Our approach will thus bring us from a critical examination of the concept of perspective taking down to a look at what practical shifts this critique might entail. In the first section, we will examine the importance that perspective taking holds in the fields of cognitive and developmental psychology, as well as social and political philosophy, mobilizing the most common general understanding of perspective taking as the imaginative simulation of others’ cognitive-emotional states. This conception will be fleshed out in the second section, where its difficulties, already acknowledged in the simulation literature, will be addressed. A third section introduces a series of further complications that call into question the simulative account. The fourth section will lay out what we see as the core skills that make up the higher-level skill of perspective taking, which will also allow us to better define an ideal toward which perspective taking practices might tend. A fifth section will explore the limits of the skill paradigm with regard to perspective taking, briefly sketching out the

⁴ This shift seems to have first occurred in the United States, followed by Australia and then Europe. Francophone literature in particular has devoted much attention to the conceptual development of this shift. See in particular, P. PERRENOUD, *Construire des compétences à l’école*, Paris, ESF, 1997.

role of one's relationship with the belief in the transformability of the self. Finally, we will close with some short remarks on the implications of this approach for educational practices.

Perspective taking in contemporary psychological and social theory

Let's begin with a general definition of perspective taking as the simulative approximation of another person's mental and emotional states through imaginative simulation. What good does it do us to imagine what another is thinking?

As mentioned in the introduction, the psychological literature paints perspective taking as having a broad positive effect on social interactions: "People behave better – more acceptably, more admirably, more prosocially – after perspective taking"⁵. By generating compassionate emotions and deducing which potential actions would be beneficial to the other, perspective taking should give us both the knowledge and motivation to engage in helpful behavior. It should also help us overcome the "fundamental attribution error", by which we attribute others' apparent moral shortcomings to bad intentions while explaining our own similar shortcomings as the result of contextual contingencies. Indeed, if we can see what prevents the other from acting according to a certain standard, it should be easier to switch our focus from blame to care. Furthermore, seeing the world through the eyes of the member of a given social group should help reduce prejudice towards the socially visible members of that group, nuancing the traits broadly applied to those members through an understanding of the individual differences and how these are grounded in singular life experiences. In short, donning the goggles of the other's perspective should have widespread positive effects across the board, if only we could encourage people to do it.

In the realm of political and social philosophy, perspective taking also plays a key role. Beginning with Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*⁶, imaginative recourse to the perspective of an impartial spectator – an abstract human entity stripped of any particularities that might bias its judgment – was put forward as the only means of counterbalancing an otherwise dangerous self-interest. This movement of *decentering*⁷ as a cognitive tool for moral reasoning evolved into more elaborate forms in the 20th century. The theme of impartiality through the adoption of an abstract perspective reappeared most notably in John Rawls' thought experiment of a veil of ignorance, by which the justness of a social order could be evaluated by imaging oneself in an original position where one's particular social standing and personal characteristics were unknown, and

⁵ S. HODGES, B. CLARK, & M. MYERS, "Better living through perspective taking", *op. cit.*, p. 194.

⁶ A. SMITH, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. K. HAAKONSSSEN, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002 (1759).

⁷ P.-É. VANDAMME, "Qu'est-ce que le décentrement? Moralité individuelle et justice sociale", in *Ethica*, vol. 21, n°1 (2017), pp. 167-202.

then weighing whether or not one would consent to such an order without being able to choose their place in it. Such an exercise calls for an imaginative taking up of the perspectives of the different social classes or positions, some certainly less desirable than others, followed by a reappraisal of the risk one would be willing to take to end up in such a position.

Moving away from abstract entities and over to the interests of real people involved in or potentially affected by a certain decision, Jürgen Habermas' discourse ethics pursues a dialogical approach to the taking up of perspectives in moral reasoning⁸. The reference to an ideal speech situation – an abstract situation in which all parties receive equal opportunity to express their perspective and interests – is posed as a transcendental ideal toward which our actual decision-making processes might tend, in order to better assure the moral legitimacy of their outcomes. In the real world, this translates into an attention to the perfecting of procedures in which we place our trust to ensure the effective equal expression of the perspectives of concerned parties.

Finally, with critical reference to such procedural discourse ethics, Axel Honneth's recognition theory deepens the reference to perspective taking within philosophy, and more specifically in relation to Habermas' approach, in a multifaceted way⁹. First, Honneth puts forward that we cannot count on procedures, no matter how well constructed, to guarantee the effective exchange of perspectives, due to internal psychological blockages that prevent people from either taking part in deliberative procedures or from expressing themselves adequately within them. Nancy Fraser, also contributing to reflections on recognition theory, points as well to the prejudices aimed at certain socially identifiable characteristics (race, class, sex, etc.) that might prevent *other* participants from giving full credence to the perspectives expressed by individuals who appear to bear such characteristics¹⁰. But Honneth's worry goes further in its appreciation of the centrality of perspective taking. The mechanism he identifies as responsible for the internalization of a negative self-image or the development of a negative relationship with oneself, either of which might cause the self-silencing dynamics described above, is anchored precisely in the perspective-taking processes that allow for reflexive self-consciousness to arise in the first place. Honneth calls on George Herbert Mead's developmental account, in which self-consciousness slowly arises by seeing oneself through the eyes of others – that is, by taking perspectives in which one figures as a social object –, which, through generalization and abstraction, progressively allows for the constitution of a general self-image: a “me” that is not bound to the particularities of any single person's viewpoint. Honneth's takeaway from Mead's developmental theory is that since reflexive self-consciousness is

⁸ J. HABERMAS, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on Philosophical Justification", in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. C. LENHART, Christian & S.W. NICHOLSON, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 1980.

⁹ A. HONNETH, *The Struggle for Recognition*, trans. J. ANDERSON, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 1996.

¹⁰ N. FRASER, "Rethinking Recognition", in *New Left Review*, vol. 3 (2000), pp. 107-120.

socially constituted through perspective taking, the relationship with oneself that such self-consciousness allows for is vulnerable to the same dynamics. If someone systematically takes up perspectives that cast them as not having bodily autonomy, not having the same rights as others, or as having negatively-valued particularities, this person might internalize such perspectives to the point of being imprisoned by them. Such a prospect underscores the importance of not just taking another's perspective, but of taking it a certain way.

Finally, moving from philosophy to contemporary developmental psychology, a resurgence of Meadian thought has once again moved perspective taking to the forefront of discussions on both early childhood development and education. In particular, the work of Jack Martin and colleagues has brought renewed critical interest to the epistemological concerns surrounding simulative and theory of mind theories of perspective taking, underscoring the relational nature of perspectives and the limits of 'mentalist' approaches¹¹. We will come back to the work of Martin and his colleagues, but let us for now simply note the centrality of perspective taking through position exchange in their developmental accounts and their insistence on the necessity for educationally-oriented discussions of self-esteem or self-concept to focus on a continued engagement with the perspectives of others¹², an element that, according to some, has been lacking in the recent positive psychology movement¹³.

Perspective taking as simulation

While recent approaches in cognitive psychology to perspective taking have been largely split into two camps, *theory of mind theory* and *simulation theory*, these share many characteristics and their competition has seemingly given way to a pluralist picture within the discipline. While theory of mind theory posits that perspective taking is accomplished through the development of a partially unconscious lay theory populated with law-like beliefs that connect others' behavioral outcomes to desires and beliefs that can be deduced from available information, simulation theory posits that we take another's perspective by imagining how *we* would feel in another's position, and then adjusting for self/other differences. According to Shannon Spaulding¹⁴, these previously-

¹¹ J. MARTIN & A. GILLESPIE, "A Neo-Meadian approach to human agency: relating the social and the psychological in the ontogenesis of perspective-coordinating persons", in *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, vol. 44, n°3 (2010), pp. 252-272; J. STONE, J. CARPENDALE, J. SUGARMAN & J. MARTIN, "A Meadian account of social understanding: Taking a non-mentalist approach to infant and verbal false belief understanding", in *New Ideas in Psychology*, vol. 30 (2012), pp. 166-178.

¹² J. MARTIN, Jack & A.-M. MCLELLAN, *The Education of Selves: How Psychology Transformed Students*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2013.

¹³ CHRISTOPHER, John Chambers & HICKINBOTTOM, Sarah, "Positive Psychology, Ethnocentrism, and the Disguised Ideology of Individualism", in *Theory and Psychology*, vol. 18, n°5 (2008), pp. 563-589; M. PÉREZ-ALVAREZ, "The Science of Happiness: As Felicitous as It Is Fallacious", in *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, vol. 36, n°1(2016), pp. 1-19.

¹⁴ S. SPAULDING, "Cognitive Empathy", in H. MAIBOM (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*, New York, Routledge, 2017, pp. 13-21.

opposed camps have found common ground in the recognition that both types of processes take place, and she puts forward the hypothesis that simulative processes occur when we perceive the other to be similar to us, while theory of mind strategies take over when the other is considered an outgroup member with respect to relevant criteria. However, as Spaulding points out, even this binary picture remains insufficient, since, depending on how much relevant information is needed to produce a reasonably good¹⁵ simulation, simulation theory can be seen as “collapsing” into theory of mind theory. That is, at some level of informational necessity, the cognitive processes at play in simulation accounts and theory of mind accounts become indistinguishable. Similarly, it could be argued that theory theory, cast on the model of cold scientific reasoning, necessarily includes simulative elements. Indeed, the direction of attention to supposedly-deduced desires and beliefs that animate another’s behavior may not be entirely separable from the relationship with our own lived experiences of similar desires and beliefs, experiences that help shape the ‘law-like beliefs’ in our theories and make the results of the deductive process meaningful. While we might not always simulate another’s deduced mental state to the point of feeling-with them, the parallels between our own embodied experiences and those we seek to understand in the other call up a simulative element (in the sense of imaginative recreation or reactivation of past feelings and beliefs) that is incomparable to deduced states of non-human entities.

As such, we propose to focus on the simulation approach with the understanding that theory of mind theory shares important characteristics. At play in both accounts of perspective taking are mental processes that seek to bring us to appreciate or understand something about another’s mental state. These mental processes are fed with information from different sources, which can be broadly divided into three categories: the behavior of the person whose perspective we wish to take, the environment in which that person is acting, and our own prior experience and knowledge. In a given context, any one of these sources might play a predominant role. If we think that someone is doing something that we have extensive experience with or knowledge of, we might remain content with a simple transposition of our remembered experience onto the current case, assuming they share the same thoughts, desires, feelings, beliefs, intentions, or motives (to name a few) that we remember experiencing. If a given environment lends itself to behavioral regularities among those who act in it, these might serve as the guiding lens through which we decode their actions. For example, someone working at a ticket booth might rightly assume that most people who approach them are there for the same reason, and the attribution of this reason might suffice as far as taking the (supposed) customer’s perspective is concerned. Finally, our observations of another’s behavior may

¹⁵ As Spaulding notes, we do not always take others’ perspectives for the same reason, and the criteria at play in determining the adequacy of a simulative approximation depend on the goals of the perspective taking process. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

take the lead when the other factors do not lend themselves to easy interpretations. In such cases, we might pay attention to the person's actions, their facial movements, inflections in their voice, and, of course, what they say¹⁶.

However, as simulation theorists readily acknowledge, accuracy is an issue when it comes to imagining how another feels or what they are thinking. Many obstacles stand between us and an adequate imaginative reconstruction of the other's mind. A straightforward example is the immediate recourse to stereotypes, which can color our subsequent interpretations of another's behavior. Stereotypes may of course be usefully mobilized, when accuracy is unimportant and a quick decision must be made, but they clearly pose a threat to genuine understanding. Taking a closer look at the two-step model of perspective taking – where we imagine first how we would feel or think in another's position and then adjust for perceived self/other differences – reveals just how many more subtle obstacles we may confront. What is it that we need to adjust for, and how can we accomplish the adjustment?

A first set of self/other differences may indeed be gleaned from basic observation. Seeing that the other is a member of the other sex, of another ethnicity, or presents themselves in a way that indicates a different class status, any of these factors may alert us to the fact that their experience of a position we have experience with may be different from ours. What is less clear, to the extent that we have no experience of being in that position with these particularities, is how we might correct for them. Certainly, stories we've read or episodes that others have shared with us might give us an insight, but the threat of recourse to stereotypes reappears here even once a first effort has been made to see the situation through another's eyes. One immediately salient factor that may however play a clear positive role is the observation that the other has a different mother tongue than our own: depending on the exposure we have had to cosmopolitan communication, such an observation might immediately draw our attention to the consideration that the other person might attribute different meanings to the words they use, which can downplay our certainty in having correctly understood what that person is thinking. As we will see in the fourth section, this relationship of uncertainty is indeed crucial for getting closer to the other's view.

However, a second set of self/other differences appears more difficult to grasp from observation alone. A first example is that of privileged information. If I know something that you don't know, but I don't know that you don't know it, I may read your actions in a very different light. While this is great for situational comedy, it presents a significant barrier to everyday interpersonal

¹⁶ Many of these examples, among others, can be found in the following collective works: B. MALLE, & S. HODGES (eds.), *Other Minds: How Humans Bridge the Divide Between Self and Others*, New York, Guilford Press, 2005; K. MARKMAN, W. KLEIN & J. SUHR (eds.), *Handbook of Imagination and Mental Simulation*, New York, Psychology Press, 2009.

understanding. Indeed, a host of background assumptions at play in the way another orients themselves to a situation may also remain out of sight for someone hoping to understand them. These assumptions may be fed by multiple, equally inaccessible sources. Relevant past experiences color the way they approach new contexts. Immediate prior experience, regardless of its relevance, may prime their attention in a certain direction, thereby altering the perspective to be understood. Indeed, someone who stubs their toe before entering a surprise party might appear less enthused than expected to the guests, for a reason that is imperceptible and entirely unrelated to the gathering. Moreover, the application of different types of logical reasoning, be they grounded in some lay logic or a highly sophisticated but perhaps unrelated body of technical knowledge, may also affect another's viewpoint while remaining out of sight. Finally, all of these factors may additionally feed a set of evaluative criteria that we do not share.

This is a lot to take into account, and there are thus many points at which we can make a mistake. Perfect accuracy, to be sure, is not always important. Indeed, as one simulation theorist notes, the effort of taking another's perspective is enough to generate prosocial effects, regardless of accuracy¹⁷. As the considerations in the previous section have hopefully made clear, however, this may not always be enough. When making a decision where others are involved, understanding their needs, interests and feelings is important. Moreover, when it comes to seeing oneself through the eyes of the other, we have no interest in generating an inaccurate simulation in which we are needlessly belittled. Finally, as two commenters note, there's always the chance that we simply fail to activate the simulation process at all, leaving us all but blind to the mind of the other, who may as well then be a perspectiveless object¹⁸.

Further complications in simulative models

In this section we would like to explore a series of considerations that further complicate the above picture. Indeed, the simulative models seem to presuppose a certain understanding of what the other's perspective is. The understanding that emerges is that of a unitary mental state to which the other has full conscious access. In many cases, it seems that this state is fixed, or at least that it is somehow desirable to recreate a separate, preexisting mental state without 'interfering' in it. Such an image of the act of perspective taking risks limiting our understanding of the skills that may be cultivated in order to favor beneficial perspective taking habits. We will mention a few preliminary complications before exploring the critique developed by the contemporary developmental theorists mentioned above.

¹⁷ S. HODGES, B. CLARK, & M. MYERS, "Better living through perspective taking", *op. cit.*, pp. 193-218.

¹⁸ N. EPLEY & E. CARUSO. "Perspective taking: misstepping into others' shoes", in *Handbook of Imagination and Mental Simulation*, *op. cit.*, p. 298.

A first major issue concerns unconscious or unacknowledged emotions, desires, needs or beliefs that contribute to a person's perspective. In the previous section we mentioned the inaccessibility of others' background assumptions to anyone hoping to understand their point of view. The other person may however be similarly unaware that such an assumption is guiding their interpretation of events, hence its position in the 'background of meaning'¹⁹. Are these to be included in the 'taking' of the other's perspective? Similar questions apply to emotions, needs and desires at play. The skills of identifying one's own emotional states are far from given, as is their activation at any given moment. If another has not done the work of identifying the way their own emotions inform their appreciation of a situation, should our accurate simulation of their perspective include such identification? Do we get extra credit or points taken off for not following instructions? Furthermore, we are not always honest with ourselves, so even when an emotion or desire works its way into consciousness, we sometimes edge it out of our attention so as to function without the discomfort it brings. Should such once-conscious elements be imaginatively reconstructed? Similarly, sometimes we need help with something but won't admit it to ourselves out of pride; which version of the other's interests should then be taken into account by their aspiring perspective-taker?

A related issue concerns the stability of perspectives. Whether we subscribe to a cognitive definition of perspectives as conscious mental states or a pragmatist definition of perspectives as "perceptual and conceptual orientations to a situation with a view to acting within that situation"²⁰, both of these are constantly changing. Most notably, one of the main tools we have at hand for reaching a nuanced understanding of the other's perspective, namely, talking to the person, may very well be a factor in transforming that perspective. If the dialogue necessary to understand the other's view of a situation alters that view, which view is the one that we were in the business of taking?

A final set of complications stem from the fact that we are able to experience or hold multiple incompatible ways of considering a given situation. It is indeed by virtue of this fact that we might hope to take the other's perspective at all. But if the other is shared between two appreciations of a same situation, the cognitive workload required for simulative accuracy increases dramatically, like a computer running multiple instances of a virtual machine. To be sure, this work can be accomplished with great effort by artists – exemplified in Dostoyevsky's profoundly intricate exploration of Raskolnikov's split mind – but daily life rarely offers the opportunity to appreciate the complexity of perspectives that resist unification even in the minds of those to whom they 'belong'. The mobilization of different sets of ethical criteria can

¹⁹ J. SEARLE, "The Background of Meaning", in J. SEARLE, F. KIEFER & M. BIERWISCH (dirs.), *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics*, Dordrecht, D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1980, pp. 221-232.

²⁰ J. MARTIN, J. SUGARMAN & S. HICKINBOTTOM, *Persons: Understanding Psychological Selfhood and Agency*, New York, Springer, 2010, p. 117.

give way to multiple ways of orienting oneself to act (which may further translate into a lack of action that could be interpreted as thoughtless inattention by an observer), just as the inscription of events into a multiple, competing ‘deep stories’ can lead one to develop multiple and separate emotional reactions to the same events. What all of these cases have in common is the lack of unification or coherence in any given perspective, one that does not appear to be taken into account by simulation theorists.

Moving on to the previously mentioned work in the field of developmental psychology, the resurgence of neo-Meadian theories has brought related concerns to the forefront of recent discussions. We can distinguish two main issues that are at stake here. The first concerns the ways in which we develop capacities to imaginatively reconstruct the perspectives of others and to coordinate these in complex social situations where successful action depends on a sufficiently accurate approximation of the perspectives of multiple people. The second concerns a broadening of the definition of perspective taking, making space within the concept for activities that go beyond imaginative reconstruction. As we will hope to show, this second issue is anything but trivial for educational applications.

From the outset, neo-Meadian approaches insist on the social and relational nature of the activity of perspective taking, in contrast with cognitive and individualistic accounts that dominate simulation theories²¹. While cognitive approaches tend to think in terms of preexisting mental concepts and structures, supported by neurophysiological mechanisms that simply await activation or stimulation, relational approaches insist that the methodological individualism underlying these theories distorts our view of a series of capacities that are born within social interactivity. For these theorists, it is through activity that perspectives emerge in the first place for the infant and child. Social activity in particular presents the first opportunities for the infant to occupy his own perspective – that is, to orient himself to a situation in view of acting within it. This first perspective-occupying activity is taken to be prereflective and prelinguistic, yet it lays the groundwork for the subsequent development of linguistically-mediated and consciously reflective perspective taking that, once again, emerges through increasingly complex social activity, notably through play and games. By exchanging positions with others²², and thus physically rehearsing the multiple ways of orienting oneself to a context, children gradually become able to appreciate the perspectival nature of reality: the idea that a same situation can have different meanings depending on one’s orientation to it. Such processes eventually allow for the development of an image of oneself as

²¹ J. SUGARMAN & B. SOKOL, “Human agency and development: An introduction and theoretical sketch”, in *New Ideas in Psychology*, vol. 30 (2012), pp. 1-14; J. MARTIN & A. GILLESPIE, “A Neo-Meadian approach to human agency: relating the social and the psychological in the ontogenesis of perspective-coordinating persons”, in *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, vol. 44, n°3 (2010), pp. 252-272.

²² A. GILLESPIE, “Position exchange: the social development of agency”, in *New Ideas in Psychology*, vol. 30 (2012), pp. 32-46.

separate from the other individuals with whom the child's activity was so intimately interwoven in the first phases. Thus, as in the Meadian account taken up by Honneth, these theorists see the development of identity, self-concept, or of a relationship with oneself as dependent on relational, social activity.

This brief developmental account does not nearly do justice to the work it refers to, but will hopefully suffice in demonstrating the inadequacy of approaches to perspective-taking that reduce it to automatically-unfolding cognitive processes located within individual brains. While a certain level of analysis certainly allows for their consideration on the individual-neurological plane, forgetting the relational history of their development can have negative consequences for thinking about their explicit development within an educational context.

The other issue at stake for neo-Meadians is a definitional one. Taking as a starting point Robert Selman's developmental sequence of five levels of perspective taking, Martin and colleagues²³ undertake a reinterpretation and extension of Selman's model. Selman's five levels proceed as follows: a first stage sees the child interacting with others as distinct entities but without adjusting to their positions, essentially engaged in a socially-situated monologue; this egocentric stage gives way to a first level of perspectival self/other differentiation, that is, an acknowledgement of the difference in situational orientations that does not, however, include an appreciation of oneself through the other's eyes; a third level gives way to the first coordination of perspectives, whereby the child is able to simultaneously hold an understanding of his own perspective and that of the other, in which he may figure as a social object; a fourth level broadens the abstraction process, granting access to third-person perspectives, that is, generalized perspectives that belong to no one in particular, but to which all are beholden (like the rules of a game which may be appealed to in order to affect the other's actions); finally, Selman's final stage sees the adolescent engaged in highly complex perspective coordination, where multiple abstract perspectives (such as ideologies or worldviews) may be considered interchangeably, alongside those of the widening circle of individuals they find themselves interacting with.

Martin and colleagues see this picture as limited on both ends. First, as mentioned, they insist on the need to take into account a level of prereflective interactivity, with the child fully immersed in the relational field, which lays the groundwork for the following types of interaction. Second, they seek to extend the reach of perspectival development to a final level termed "metareflective sociality". At such a level, the activity of perspective taking becomes thematized in and for itself: the adult becomes aware of the limits of their capacity to take another's perspective through imaginative simulation, which allows for the explicit theorization of communicative strategies that might give them greater

²³ J. MARTIN, B. SOKOL & T. ELFERS, "Taking and Coordinating Perspectives: From Prereflective Interactivity, through Reflective Intersubjectivity, to Metareflective Sociality", *op cit.*

understanding of the other when the circumstances call for such an effort to be made. Interestingly, the authors offer up two distinct ways of approaching metareflective sociality. The first, which they associate with Habermas, involves the arrangement of conditions that can ensure the adequate expression of the perspective of those involved, such as equal access to communicative resources, time and authority. This first approach, deemed ‘idealized’, is cast against a second approach to metareflective dialogical engagement, this time associated with Hans-Georg Gadamer. Eschewing universalizable procedures capable of ensuring mutual understanding, this second approach sees the adult adopting a vigilant attitude toward the fallibility of his own position, as well as that of any transmitted or adopted perspectives, in order to continually call into question the background assumptions that might overdetermine the way she interprets the meaning of the other’s words.

This second approach, insisting on the necessity of continuous internal attention to taken-for-granted aspects of the self that constantly threaten to skew the meaning of the other’s words, strikes us as crucial for thinking about educational means of developing the skills of perspective taking. Certainly, it is only through dialogue that we can ever hope to truly understand another’s thoughts, feelings and interests, but it is far from clear that an externally imposed frame such as a discursive procedure is capable of guaranteeing that those involved will go beyond their initial impressions that color the meanings of the other’s words. The need to educate toward this level of internally vigilant metareflective sociality becomes evident in such a light. It is with such a necessity in mind that we propose the following sketch of a conceptual framework for developing the skills of perspective taking.

The skills of perspective taking

As Martin and colleagues emphasize, “no such metareflective inquiry would be possible outside of the logically and developmentally prior interactive and intersubjective perspective-taking coordinations”²⁴ listed in Selman’s model and its front-end extension into prereflective interactivity. We would like to similarly emphasize that this relationship of dependence is not limited to one of logic or development: undertaking the efforts of dialogical inquiry in a given context may also depend on the prior and/or simultaneous activation of an array of skills that are not uniquely dialogical. The set of the skills that may lead to the type of metareflective activity described above, and which may be trained in an educational setting, are what we seek to describe here.

Despite the overall negative tone employed when discussing purely simulative approaches to perspective taking, a first set of skills can in fact be readily described as concerning an activity of simulation. Two things set apart

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 312.

these approaches stemming from cognitive psychology from the framework we wish to develop here. The first relates to the above-mentioned definitional issue: we don't see simulative skills as exhausting the full range of capacities that might be of interest to someone wishing to develop perspective taking skills in themselves or someone else. Second, we seek to insist on the non-pre-given nature of these skills. A metaphor present in the writings of two simulation theorists states that "owning impressive technology and using it correctly are two entirely different things"²⁵, referring to the need to correctly use the innate capacities involved in simulation. Fleshing out the educational consequences of neo-Meadian theorists, we hope to underscore the necessity of *coming into ownership* of the technology that must then be used correctly: that is, developing the skills of perspective taking instead of taking their existence for granted.

If simulation is so prone to error, why is it so important to the practice of dialogue? Simply put, in order to see the interest of making the effort to engage in a discussion, one must first generate a first imaginative approximation of a difference that might be appreciated through it. Not only that, certain situations that can benefit from understanding another's perspective preclude the possibility, or sometimes the appropriateness, of dialogue. Therefore, it is interesting to develop the skills involved in generating imaginative approximations of the perspectives of others. These skills are all deeply intertwined and can be cut up in different ways; our framework merely sets out one way of thinking about their conjunction.

The first of these skills involves, unsurprisingly, the *imagination*. *The ability to form images in one's mind of objects and situations that are not directly present in reality* is crucial to the simulation of others' perspectives, but its full development does not happen on its own. The increasing amount of screen time spent by children, where a stream of ever more detailed images effortlessly flows by, decreases their exposure to training in the formation of mental imagery, with respect to pre-screen cultures where told and read stories required active imaginative work in order to come to life. As such, it becomes more and more important to orient school activities in view of exercising the skill of using one's imagination to form mental imagery. In this vein, Kieran Egan insists on the integration of mental imagery into classroom activities involving all disciplines²⁶. The importance he sees pertains more to reviving the joy of learning by incorporating the imaginative activities that kids love to engage in. His focus is, of course, well founded, but this imaginative skill can also be seen as crucial to interpersonal understanding.

Sticking close to Egan's work, a second skill involves mastery of *narrative tools*. In Egan's words, the story "is a kind of tool that enables you to understand how to feel about events"²⁷. Indeed, the inscription of a given event

²⁵ N. EPLEY & E. CARUSO, "Perspective taking: misstepping into others' shoes", *op. cit.*, p. 297.

²⁶ K. EGAN, *An Imaginative Approach to Teaching*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2005.

²⁷ K. EGAN, *The Future of Education*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2008, p. 51.

into a broader storyline, whose characters we develop imaginative relationships with and become emotionally attached to, changes the affective or moral valence of the event. It makes otherwise bland details crucial, focusing our attention to aspects that otherwise remain out of scope. This is because, beyond the affective aspect, the story gives *meaning* to objects, actions and events: it enriches the symbolic scope of previously perceived but otherwise mundane aspects of reality (and, of course, fiction). So, what kind of skill is associated to the narrative form, and how does it impact perspective taking? What we have in mind is *the ability to inscribe an event, action, or object into a multiplicity of narrative frames*. By holding in one's attention the different meanings that an event can take on in light of potential broader stories it could be involved in, it becomes easier to resist attributing a single meaning to what the other says or does. One of the main dangers in simulative perspective taking is considering the other as another instance of oneself, who has the same semantic relationships to words, objects and actions as we do. This is of course not the case, as differing past experiences and background assumptions (among other factors) affect the meaning people attribute to words, objects and actions.

Certainly, nothing risks taking us further away from understanding the other than preemptively attributing a single fixed meaning to the first elements we perceive, which can then color all further interpretations. As such, the skills of perspective taking should include a strong focus on factors capable of destabilizing fixed and unitary relations of meaning.

A third set of skills involved in the simulative side of perspective taking concerns *emotions*. A set of emotional skills is once again crucial for adopting the other's perspective, for a variety of reasons. In *Les compétences émotionnelles*²⁸ (*Emotional Skills*), Moïra Mikolajczak and colleagues identify five major sets of emotional skills, each with an intrapersonal and an interpersonal component: identification, understanding, expression, regulation, and use. All of these can be seen to have an impact on perspective taking (and not just in its simulative aspect), but for brevity's sake we will focus on the first two. Identification of the other's emotions is already a form of perspective taking, but what about the identification of one's own current and past emotions? As simulative theorists regularly point out, perspective taking often involves imagining how we would feel in someone's position, and then adjusting for self/other differences. To imagine how we would feel in such a place, we need to accurately identify how we *actually* felt in whatever parallel past experience we call up from our memory. This involves not only having identified a feeling in the first place, but also ensuring that one's current emotional state doesn't skew our memory – or, at the very least, being aware of potential distortion effects. To be aware of such effects, we need be in touch with our current emotional state. This “being in touch” or listening to oneself

²⁸ M. MIKOLAJCZAK (dir), *Les compétences émotionnelles*, Paris, Dunod, 2009.

does not happen spontaneously: it is a skill that needs to be developed and, once developed, trained so as to create a disposition to its regular use²⁹.

The understanding of emotions also plays a clear role in simulative efforts. Such an understanding can play out on different levels. A first level concerns an awareness of the relationships between emotions and the different needs that they can play as indicators for. Indeed, it is important to recognize not only the origins of our own current emotions that might color our simulative activities, in order to better adjust for the effects they might have, but also to recognize that the affective displays we perceive in others can be grounded in many different unmet needs. There is not a one-to-one relationship between certain needs and certain feelings, and an appreciation of this indeterminacy once again contributes to destabilizing the unitary meanings we might attribute to emotions we perceive. A second level concerns an understanding of the complexity that emotional dynamics can take on. While some situations lend themselves to relatively straightforward affective stances, highly complex social situations – those in which being understood by another can become all the more important – may stir up deeply ambivalent or even contradictory emotional dynamics³⁰. An appreciation of such potential ambivalence may not spring up naturally from personal experiences that, with developed emotional skills, could be described in such terms. The mastery of a rich emotional vocabulary as well as expertise in the nuances of its use are skills that require educational attention.

A last set of skills involved in the conjuring up a simulation of the other's perspective relates to *critical thinking*, defined here as *the ability to notice and focus critical attention on unquestioned or assumptive features of one's own perspective, in order to enable more hypotheses pertaining to the other's view*. Indeed, if we are only able to generate one hypothesis, our subsequent appreciation of the other's words or actions is limited to confirmation (whether or not the other would recognize our hypothesis as correct) or dismissal as irrational. To expand our hypothetical possibilities, we must be able and willing to make an effort to examine our own assumptions. The ability in question, as in the previous cases, cannot be presumed to arise spontaneously, it must be trained if we hope to count on its appearance. As for the will, in order to expend the effort involved, we must be convinced of the interest of decentering, as least in some cases. Such a conviction can of course emerge through nonpedagogical personal life experiences, but, again, this is not something we can count on. While critical thinking skills have received some criticism for presupposing an agent whose cognitions are transparent to him³¹, it should be noted that there exist interesting formulations of this skill that explicitly avoid

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁰ M. NUSSBAUM, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

³¹ D. JEFFREY, « Pédagogie de la pensée critique et émancipation du sujet », in A. ROBICHAUD, M. TARDIF & A. MORALES PERLAZA (dirs.), *Sciences sociales et théories critiques dans la formation des enseignants*, Laval, Presses de l'Université de Laval, 2015, pp.171-192

individualist/rationalistic biases, privileging for example the form of internalized critical discussion, whose training then involves not isolated exercises but a well-led debate³².

Among the four sets of skills mentioned so far, the last two have probably received the most attention, for reasons not entirely unrelated to perspective taking, though not always thematized in its light. Emotional education has already worked its way into a number of school programs, as has critical thinking in high school philosophy classes, such as the philosophy and citizenship class recently made mandatory in Belgium.

The skills involved in the imaginative simulation of another's perspective are, of course, not sufficient for reaching an understanding of the other's view: highly sophisticated guesswork is still guesswork, which can never replace dialogue in which we remain open to the fallibility of our own positions. However, they are nonetheless important for both drawing our attention to the interest of opening such a dialogue and for staving off the foreclosure of our interpretative lenses during discussion. Furthermore, the conditions for sufficiently open and extensive dialogue are not always available or creatable; in such cases, sophisticated guesswork beats unreflective guesswork, as long as the sophistication does not lead to a presumption of accuracy!

That being said, these simulative skills should be supplemented by a series of *dialogical skills* that go beyond the ability to speak coherently and listen attentively (though of course they presuppose these). One important skill that falls into this category is the ability to formulate well-worded follow-up questions, in order to help the other flesh out their own account of what they're thinking or feeling. As mentioned in the previous section, we are not always aware of the needs, emotions, desires or assumptions that underwrite our orientations to situations; sometimes we need the help of a friend who, through careful and unintrusive responses and inquiries, can help open us up to parts of our own experience that we could not otherwise clearly express – to ourselves or to others. A related skill pertains to knowing when to stop asking such questions so as not to invade the other's privacy: no good can come of forcefully taking another's perspective. Another skill might involve the ability to formulate fresh interpretations of another's experience while insisting on their hypothetical nature. Helping the other decenter from their own fixed interpretation of a situation, while being attentive not to impose one's own, may indeed help them better formulate their lived experiences. In such cases, perhaps the term 'perspective taking' becomes misleading, because through such dialogue a new perspective is being generated in the space between the two previously existing ones.

This dynamic of a *simultaneous voluntary transformation of two (or more) individuals' perspectives* is perhaps the ideal toward which perspective-

³² M. LIPMAN, *Natacha: Vygotskian Dialogues*, New York, Teacher's College Press, 1996, p. 104.

taking activities should tend. Such transformation requires a certain will to openness from all participants, but such a will is not enough. It also requires a complex set of skills. Ideally, the success of the perspective taking process would be best guaranteed if all parties were educated in such skills, though their development in at least one party, who is then called to do twice the work, is of course better than nothing.

Where skills fall short

The skills of perspective taking are those aspects of the processes of mutual understanding and self-transformation that might be considered trainable. Indeed, a skill is a type of *savoir-agir* (knowing how to act) that is applicable to a number of problematic situations, and which may be exercised through a subset of these situations, which then become tools that the individual has at her disposal and whose potential for creative use is based on their mastery. While breaking down the activity of perspective taking into a series of lower level components has the advantage of pointing our attention toward the need to integrate the training of these into educative practices, it would be erroneous to posit the success of perspective taking activities as relying solely on forms of practical knowledge that, once acquired, remain ready at hand.

As mentioned in the introduction, the crucial element of the perspective taking process that cannot be reduced to a skill that automatically deploys once mastered involves attention paid to the transformability of the self. This object of belief, that selfhood (or one's relationship with oneself) is alterable, can bear different names – the self's constitutive non-identity with itself³³, the iterativity of the self, its non-pregivenness, or even its developmentality – all of which refer to the idea that selfhood is fundamentally predicated on difference with itself over time. While philosophy has done away with essential selves since its existential turn, this deep cultural knowledge that no substantive core composes the heart of reflective self-consciousness coexists with a cult of authenticity that encourages individuals to discover their “true selves” through introspection³⁴. Similarly, on the level of individuals, it is possible to entertain conscious beliefs about the transformability of the self (either in general or pertaining to certain aspects) and yet, in the heat of action, implicitly mobilize a belief in the self's immutability while listening or speaking.

The belief in the non-essential nature of the self has recently been the focus of the psychological paradigm of self-theory theory³⁵. Inaugurated by

³³ M. MAESSCHALCK, *Reflexive Governance for Research and Innovative Knowledge*, ISTE/Wiley, London, 2017, p. 90.

³⁴ See, for example, C. LE BART, « L'injonction à être soi-même : entre quête de singularité et standardisation », in *Nouvelles perspectives en sciences sociales*, vol. 8, n°1 (2012), pp. 61-81.

³⁵ C.S. DWECK, *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality, and development*, New York/London, Psychology Press, 2000.

Carol Dweck, this paradigm has been studying relationships between people's beliefs in the nature of selfhood (as recorded by questionnaires) and a large series of behavioral outcomes. The overarching idea is that each person carries an implicit theory concerning the nature of the self (a "self-theory"), which conditions the way they interpret their own actions and those of others, as well as the types of goals they set for themselves. According to the model, *entity theorists*, believing in a core self, read behavior as an expression of this pre-given self, and seek out situations in which they can perform the virtues that they believe their self to encompass. These theorists tend to believe that prison exists to punish the bad that exists in certain people, and they tend to read relationship issues as a sign of incompatibility³⁶. On the other hand, *incremental theorists*, believing that the self is alterable in increments, tend to read other's behavior in light of contextual factors, and diagnose their own shortcomings as stemming from a lack of effort. They eschew performance goals in favor of learning opportunities, even if it means that they might demonstrate a current incapacity in the process.

While this paradigm has the great merit of introducing a crucial issue into mainstream psychological literature and thinking, it is beset by a number of difficulties. The main issue with Dweck's framework is that it casts the belief in question as unilateral or at the very least highly generalized. Multiple critiques within the psychological literature attest to this. Some psychologists break apart the belief in question into a series of beliefs, leading studies that purport to demonstrate that we may hold separate beliefs about the discreteness, uniformity, informativeness, naturalness, immutability, stability, inherence, necessity and exclusivity of any given attribute, all of which could be seen as participating in its "essentialness"³⁷. Others have led studies whose results seem to indicate that the same individuals mobilize different self-theories depending on who and what is being examined, and that the fluidity that characterizes these theories' mobilization is motivated by a desire to protect certain other beliefs – especially those that participate in the individual's self-image³⁸. On the whole, splitting humanity into two groups, based on an overgeneralized difference regarding one fundamental belief, runs the risk of essentializing these groups themselves, but also masks the *complexity* that characterizes the *relationship* that everyone has with the belief in the self's alterability.

Coming back to perspective taking practices, this complex relationship of belief can be seen as conditioning the fruitful use of perspective taking skills in at least two ways, corresponding to the attention paid to the other's and one's own self-transformability in the moment of exchange. We will tackle the

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70-72, 86-87.

³⁷ N. HASLAM, L. ROTHSCHILD & D. ERNST "Essentialist beliefs about social categories", in *British Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 39 (2000), pp. 113-127, pp. 117-118.

³⁸ A.E. WILSON & J.A. ENGLISH, "The motivated fluidity of lay theories of change", in C.M. ZEDELIOUS, B.C.N. MÜLLER, J. W. SCHOOLER (eds.) *The Science of Lay Theories*, Cham, Springer International Publishing, pp. 17-43.

consequences of this attention in that order, examining how each dimension of the belief relationship affects interpersonal understanding, before closing the section by underscoring the tight link between perspective taking and identity reflexivity.

How is it, then, that attention to another person's fundamental non-identity can help us "take their perspective"? In a chapter titled "Non-Transformative Social Interaction"³⁹, Alex Gillespie discusses the obstacles that continue to haunt Gordon Allport's contact hypothesis, according to which contact between social groups is supposed to help individuals in each group reduce their recourse to debilitating stereotypes. After going through a series of supplementary conditions that must be met before contact can lead to transformation, notably pertaining to context and process, Gillespie introduces the concept of "semantic barriers". This concept refers to those "processes through which semantic content blocks incoming meanings, or alternative ways of thinking, which are potentially destabilizing"⁴⁰. Responding to the apparently paradoxical situation where globalization has led to constant contact with otherness but not openness to its difference, Gillespie turns his focus to beliefs about the position from which the other is speaking, and how these can be used to quarantine what is potentially destabilizing in the other's speech. His illustration of the semantic barrier centers largely around the identification of the other as a stigmatized being whose perspective is of no importance, a framing which can either neutralize transmitted content or preclude interaction altogether; however, he opens the concept up to other positional attributions that might neutralize semantic content, such as the existence of ulterior motives or a lack of intelligence that leads to unfounded beliefs. Whenever we can say "yes, but he is only saying this because he *is*...", a semantic barrier is in play.

In light of this, the attribution to the other of a fixed self of any kind stands as the semantic barrier *par excellence*. If we listen to the other's words through the lens of a pre-given self that is implicitly presumed to be expressing them, our interpretation is limited by whatever we think we know about the person: semantic interpretation is doomed to conform to already-possessed knowledge, and other's otherness remains forever out of reach. On the other hand, when we *pay attention in the moment* to the non-identity that constitutes the other as a self, our narrative imagination has free reign over the field of semantic possibilities. Some of these will be entirely unconnected to the other's original intention, but they become possibilities of understanding for both parties to explore. Following the perspective-taking ideal of meta-reflexive sociality, whereby perspective taking always involves the voluntary transformation of multiple parties' perspectives, it is only when we are able to

³⁹ A. GILLESPIE, "Non-Transformative Social Interaction", in C. PSALTIS, A. GILLESPIE & A.-N. PERRET-CLERMONT (eds.), *Social Relations in Human and Societal Development*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 97-113.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

remind ourselves in the moment that the other can always change their relationship with themselves that we can adopt a dialogical posture capable of leading to this effective self-other transformation. We are, in a sense, talking about relationships of mutual recognition of the other's freedom: to the extent that we are motivated to act in accordance with our self-image, first order internal freedom (autonomy understood as being able to follow one's self-given law) is predicated on the second-order freedom of being able to alter our imagistic relationships with ourselves – that is, the irreducible non-identity of the self that allows such laws to be self-given and not rooted in an essential core.

However, recognizing the other's self-transformability is not enough. Attention paid to one's *own* non-pregivenness equally conditions the fruitful deployment of perspective taking skills. Indeed, the tools of interpretative flexibility, by opening up doors to the possible meanings of the other's speech, can turn against their bearer if he, in the moment of exchange, fails to remain aware of his own lack of an essential core. If one's relationship to oneself is brought into social situations as a frozen block, a sharpened narrative imagination can contort with even greater force incoming words to fit the meaning structure that refuses to be called into question, forming an internal semantic barrier. While inattention to our own fundamental alterability can motivate us to distort the other's words into a confirmation of the self, it can also motivate us to speak with the goal of having them recognize that substantive self as we see it. In either case, the ideal of mutual transformation of self-understandings through openness to the other's otherness is jettisoned in favor of defensive posturing that confers the perceived advantage of safety: by maintaining our position, we hold onto its drawbacks, but these are at least already known to us.

We all pay attention, at times, to our own transformability and that of others. Yet, especially as self-understandings consolidate with age, the risk of inadvertently falling back into "entity thinking" is ever present. This is why, in contrast with the self-theory theory perspective, we find it more useful to conceive this crucial object of belief as situated in a complex relationship that each individual is responsible for. We constantly act on the basis of implicit beliefs, and, in the case of such an important object of belief, it is imperative to continually bring back to the forefront, if only in our inner speech, our understanding of the non-identity of any self with itself. Only by remaining vigilant with respect to this object of belief can we hope to get closer to the other's perspective by allowing our own to be transformed.

The importance of openness to the other, and thus "taking their perspectives", goes beyond interpersonal understanding. We are relational beings who come to understand ourselves – to have an identity – due to such openness. Similarly, we can only hope to change our relationships with ourselves by and through this openness. This is particularly well illustrated in the construction of the reflexive operation by Jacques Lenoble and Marc

Maesschalck. The two authors begin with a critique of reflection in action as it appears in the renowned work of Donald Schön. Schön's focus is on how professionals think in action, and, he argues, the core of professionalism has less to do with problem solving than it does with problem *setting*. The reflexive practitioner does not apply a pre-given frame inherited from scientific theories; rather, she adjusts the frames by which she turns a problematic situation into a problem to be solved, through a sort of conversation with the situation, thereby defining the type of decisions to be made, the goals aimed at, and the means that may be employed⁴¹. In Schön's work then, there is a visible shift from selective attention, which perceives the elements that fit into the established frame, to genetic attention, whereby the practitioner orients her attention to how the spontaneously posed frame limits her understanding of the possible meanings of the problematic situation⁴².

The problem that remains in Schön's model of reflexivity is that it is formulated purely in terms of representation, and does not interrogate how the practitioner's identity influences the way she poses the frames of understanding. On this account, frames are exchanged freely based on perceived need, as if the frame were independent of the act that posed them – an act that always involves the practitioner's own relationship with herself. As such, Lenoble and Maesschalck insist on a form of identity reflexivity as a condition for any useful frame reflexivity.

Their construction of the reflexive operation is cleaved into two dimensions⁴³. The first involves catching a glimpse of the identity that unconsciously undergirds action. We are, however, not transparent to ourselves, and access to our own self-understandings thus generally requires a background of otherness against which our difference stands out and is made visible. In this first dimension, that of "reflectibility", what is at stake is thus a grasping of an otherwise unknown or forgotten aspect of the self by way of openness to the difference of another. Only when we manage to catch glimpses of our self-image and how it limits our action possibilities can we hope to effect a change on it. This change does not flow freely from the act of grasping, however. A second dimension, that of "destinability", is required in order to pose an identity image that we give ourselves as an ethical destination, a reflexive choice about who we want to be, to ourselves and to the world. This dimension, unsurprisingly, remains inaccessible if the aspect of the self-grasped in the first dimension is done so under a theme of pre-giveness. Only when manage to see aspects of our self as being contingent and non-necessary can we hope to consciously and reflexively iterate our identities toward truly self-given ideals.

⁴¹ D. SCHÖN, *The Reflective Practitioner. How professionals think in action*, New York, Basic Books, 1983, pp. 39-40.

⁴² J. LENOBLE et M. MAESSCHALCK, *Democracy, Law and Governance*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2010, p. 181.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 219-220.

What this approach makes exceedingly explicit is the inextricability of openness to otherness and the establishment of a healthy relationship with oneself, marked by continual voluntary transformation enacted through successive choices of ethical identifications, as well as the more substantive choices that allow for the concretization of these through changing contexts. It also helps underscore the centrality of the relationship that everyone has with their object of belief that is the transformability of the self, a belief that must be actively mobilized in order to engage in identity agency – that is, the active and conscious transformation of the self.

In light of this, the skills of perspective taking, conceptualized as those skills that get us closer to the other's perspective while altering our own, stand as grease to the wheels of identity agency, while attention to the non-pregiveness of the selves of those in dialogue constitutes the true motor. Again, it strikes us as important to avoid casting this attention as a skill that, once mastered, deploys automatically when the situation calls for it. Even those who explicitly declare a firm belief in the non-essentiality of selfhood can, in the moment, be led astray by distraction or by enthusiastic commitment to some substantive aspect of the self that in previous contexts allowed for the concretization of their deep ethical convictions. Nevertheless, it is not impossible to develop a healthy relationship with the belief in the self's transformability, one that continually feeds itself with lived proof of self-surpassing.

Educational consequences and conclusive remarks

Perspective taking stands as the common thread running through vast swaths of social theory and contemporary psychological research. In one sense, the term constitutes an abstract expression of the end goal of a series of activities, some dialogical and some more purely mental. The term is also used to describe the mental activity itself, the imaginative simulation of some supposed aspects of another's mental state. We have strived to avoid flattening the first sense of the term into the second, all while examining the importance of a specific way of approaching the former's simulative components. We hope to have made clear that all paths to the posited ideal of perspective taking – that of the simultaneous voluntary transformation of two or more people's perspectives – mobilize a series of skills, a certainly incomplete list of which has been developed in the fourth section. At the same time, we hope to have raised suspicion with regard to two dimensions of the skills of perspective taking. First, it seems doubtful that these skills are innately present in humans, thus pointing to the interest of integrating their development into educational practices. Second, it is unclear that they alone, as trainable practical knowledge, can guarantee the success of perspective taking activities; vigilant attention to the transformability of the selves of all parties involved in a relational situation constitutes a condition that

can certainly be practiced but never acquired once and for all. We would now like to close with a few brief remarks on the educational implications of these considerations, beginning with the skill component and finishing with the belief relationship.

The global shift from knowledge outcomes to skill outcomes has led to different ways of organizing the skills to be taught. One such way is the division of high level skills into taxonomies of subskills that are to be individually targeted through specific exercises and independently tested. While such an approach might have its merits in certain disciplines, such as specific branches of mathematics, we do not wish to give the impression that such a cutting up would be beneficial (or even possible) when it comes to the skills of perspective taking. Indeed, all of the above skills are deeply interwoven, and their separation into different sets has the sole motive of drawing attention to the variety of activities that, in different contexts, contribute to reaching an understanding of the other's perspective. For example, understanding complex emotional dynamics may be achieved through work on the narrative logic of rich stories, which might simultaneously train the skills of mental imagery.

That being said, some of the abovementioned skills might find their way into 'specialized' classes, such as the philosophy and citizenship class that Belgium is currently experimenting with. In the future, social challenges related to globalization and individualism may indeed demonstrate the need for similar specialized classes, focused on communication and the related socio-affective skills. However, many of the skills discussed here may be trained in classes focused on different disciplines. Kieran Egan's work on the imagination and the story form in education provides countless examples of how the integration of such practices can contribute to making students more interested in the otherwise dry materials they are asked to master. Cast as "cognitive tools"⁴⁴ for learning in his work, the skills these tools empower towards may extend far beyond their application in learning⁴⁵. The vector Egan privileges for the incorporation of such tools into classroom practices is neither a separate class nor a rewriting of the curriculum, but rather the development of an *attention* to the importance and utility of such tools in the teachers who might alter routine ways of tackling their given subject matter. Such attention might be developed in initial teacher training, ongoing organized teacher education, or, better yet, the development of a school culture itself attentive to the benefits of the tools or skills proposed. The same considerations may indeed apply to the skills of perspective taking.

⁴⁴ K. EGAN, *The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding*, Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press, 1997.

⁴⁵ It is worth noting that renowned "skills" theorist Philippe Perrenoud sees the shift toward skill models in education as grounded in nothing else than the necessity of making sure that school knowledge is crafted in such a way that it becomes a *tool* for thinking and acting. P. PERRENOUD, *Construire des compétences à l'école*, op. cit., p. 28.

As mentioned in the introduction, the skills of perspective taking might also be seen as making up an important component of what we termed “identity skills”. Indeed, the dynamics of perspective taking and the development of a relationship with oneself, which is first mediated through a self-image or self-concept only available by taking and generalizing others’ perspectives, are inextricable. The development of a *healthy* and *continually transformative* relationship with oneself might further depend on *specific* ways of engaging in perspective taking activities. We mentioned with reference to Axel Honneth’s formulation of recognition theory the dangers of repeatedly seeing oneself devalued through the eyes of the other. The development of vigilance to our own *uncertainty* of how the other sees us might then prove crucial to breaking out of self-reinforcing dynamics of self-depreciation, as described in detail in William Swann’s self-verification theory, which posits that our interpretation of the other’s view of us is strongly determined by our own existing self-image⁴⁶. Breaking out of repetitive cycles in which we cast ourselves as not worthy of the love, respect or esteem of others may then depend on the skills involved in *destabilizing the interpretative habits* involved in the imaginative reconstruction of others’ perspectives in which we figure.

Purely simulative approaches to perspective taking tend to downplay the potentially dangerous aspects of generating imaginative approximations of other’s viewpoints, focusing instead on the benefits that come with mutual understanding. It is certain that working toward an understanding of another’s perspective can indeed confer such benefits, but these are far from guaranteed. The ways in which we make efforts to move in the direction of such an understanding play a key role in determining whether the outcome will be desirable or not. Due to the centrality of perspective taking activities in daily life, it would seem that we have a collective interest in developing the underlying skills in our educational institutions. There is no predetermined or predeterminable way to teach or develop these skills, but a good starting point would be the cultivation of attention to their importance and to the opportunities for engagement with them by educational professionals of all stripes.

As for the belief in the transformability of the self and the complex relationship that each individual maintains with this object of belief, the vigilance required to focus one’s attention to the non-essential nature of selfhood in the heat of the moment does not appear to be a posture that can be trained in the way a skill would, and much less a uniform belief that might be inculcated or argued in favor of. Indeed, this relationship is the responsibility of each individual, if only because no one else can act directly on it beyond reminders in the present moment. Nevertheless, schools are perhaps not entirely powerless to affect this belief relationship.

⁴⁶ W. SWANN, *Resilient Identities: Self, Relationships, and the Construction of Social Reality*, New York, Basic Books, 1999.

The belief in the self's developmentality plays a crucial role in being able to hear the other's otherness, as well as in the self-capacitation dynamic of identity reflexivity, by allowing one to look at aspects of the selves involved in the light of their continued process of becoming. When we allow the non-identity of the self to act as the *theme* of perception⁴⁷, we unlock our interpretative processes, allowing perspective taking skills to widen the range of possible meanings without fixating on *the one* which might be *the true one*. What's at stake, then, is the ability to call up the belief in the self's non-identity in the heat of action. While this ability may not be trainable, we can affect it by sowing the child's experiential field with instances of continual self-transformation. A proliferation of models of agentive self-change provides the young human with a range of examples, memories that can act as inciters of vigilance when strains on cognitive-emotional resources prevent them from paying attention to the most important feature of humanity: the capacity to change one's relationship with oneself.

If schools are to fill their walls with examples of self-transformation, the lever of action is not that of pedagogical techniques or even teacher's attention to the identity needs of children. Rather, it resides in governance structures that create the best possible conditions for *teachers'* continual growth. We are currently very far away from this point. Discourses of professionalization, which could have referred to teachers' collective autonomy as a group of professionals over their working conditions⁴⁸, have instead given way to an increasing technicality of the teaching profession. Instead of an investment in reflective practitioners, the last three decades have seen a rise in expert methods handed down to those who are supposed to enact them and whose results are constantly being checked by external instances, in what has been called the "audit culture" of contemporary schools⁴⁹.

Without individual and collective professional autonomy, and *swamped* by administrative work, parent meeting, overcrowded classes, corrections, and the other add-ons that eat up teachers' time, it is hardly surprising that many teachers in their mid-to-late careers become "defensive focusers"⁵⁰, spending their energy to protect their last bits of control. With pressure from above (principal & higher), below (parents), and the sides (other teachers with set ways of how things work), it is no wonder that many teachers struggle with their own continual self-renewal. Paolo Freire insisted that teachers must make it clear that they too are always learning and becoming⁵¹, but it is impossible to focus one's

⁴⁷ M. MAESSCHALCK, *Reflexive Governance for Research and Innovative Knowledge*, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-88.

⁴⁸ C. MAROY & B. CATTONAR, « Professionnalisation ou déprofessionnalisation des enseignants ? Le cas de la Communauté française de Belgique. », in *Les cahiers du GIRSEF*, n°18 (2002), p. 17

⁴⁹ P.M. TAUBMAN, *Teaching by Numbers. Deconstructing the Discourse of Standards and Accountability in Education*, New York/London, Routledge, 2009, pp. 88-126.

⁵⁰ C. DAY, *Developing Teachers*, London, Falmar Press, 1999, p. 17.

⁵¹ P. FREIRE, *Pedagogy of Freedom*, trans. P. CLARKE, Lanham/Boulder/New York/Oxford, Rowman & Littlefield, 2001, pp. 29-33.

energy on such a task when one is constantly looking over one's shoulder to see who's checking up on the adequacy of their work. Similarly, when teachers are led to protect their classroom space from outside eyes that might find faults therein⁵², they deprive themselves of the outside perspectives that might help them continue learning their craft.

In order for teachers to be the examples of non-identity that will give students experiences to draw from in the development of their own relationships with the belief in the self's alterability, teachers' well-being and the conditions for their continual autonomous self-transformation – which does *not* come from the endless barrage of external injunctions to change, but rather from a *desire* to keep learning that is not snuffed out by constant verification and exhaustion – must become schools' first priority.

⁵² J. ELLIOT, *Action Research for Educational Change*, Philadelphia, Open University Press, 1991, p. 58.

