Empathy

WOLFGANG HOFKIRCHNER, Vienna University of Technology, Austria

"Because it is through empathy that we become human." [1]

Like Jesper Hoffmeyer, who introduced me to the world of biosemiotics, I share the idea of the evolutionary connectedness of all natural beings. However, I differ from him in stressing in my own work the need to theoretically include every self-organising system within the realm of sign producers. I would like to paraphrase Jesper by saying that the universe is perfused with all kinds of agents – all of which are capable of generating and using signs according to the stage they happened to reach so far in the course of evolution. Such agents might be material systems that organise themselves, or living material systems, or human living systems.

Humans, of course, are special. Through their capacity for empathising with other life-forms, they have managed to split the symbolic and collective mind from the material and biological body – a split that Hoffmeyer holds largely responsible for our many false beliefs. However sympathetic I am to Hoffmeyer's criticisms of those false beliefs – and however supportive I am of his idea that *empathy* is a unique feature of humans that has to be put in biosemiotic and evolutionary perspective if we are to master the accumulated crises that humanity is facing today – I feel a need not only for relating empathy to those precursors on nonhuman levels (including those of prebiotic agents), but also a need for relating empathy to different semiotic functionalities at the same evolutionary level: that is, to cognitive, communicative and co-operative abilities according to my so-called triple-C Model (Hofkirchner 2002).

Regarding nonhuman precursors, there is evidence that some species may have the ability of perspective-taking – not only apes, but also monkeys, dogs, and birds are said to show that at least, under specified circumstances (see the literature cited in the notes to pages 99 and 100 in de Waal 2009: 243). Generally speaking, what living systems, starting with the unicellular organisms, are able to do is to anticipate what a conspecific is going to do (see Table 1: line 2, cell 2). But taking a conspecific's point of view involves a certain amount of disentanglement between one's own self and another self. Such entanglement could certainly be hypothesised as the material precursor of empathy in primitive, physical self-organising systems (see Table 1: line 2, cell 1). Perspective-taking, then, seems to be an advanced form developed from unconscious bodily connections that account for the emotional part of empathy. For de Waal "volunteering of information is not entirely absent in apes" – however, he admits "that they are less inclined than humans to engage in such behavior" (2009: 252). So empathy as a systematic feature pertains properly to humans (see Table 1: line 2, cell 3).

This leads to the second issue, which concerns the relation of empathy to different semiotic functionalities at the same evolutionary level. Rakoczy and Tomasello (2008) concede second-order intentionality to chimpanzees – intentionality being here defined as the understanding of others as perceiving and acting agents, in the context of social manipulation and competition. Ontogenetically, humans go even beyond that state in their interactions with one another, and enter into a kind of third-order intentionality: so-called shared or collective

[1] Hoffmeyer, Jesper 1996. *Signs of Meaning in the Universe*, trans. Barbara J. Haveland, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 133.

intentionality. In that respect, I propose to make a creative use of Charles Sanders Peirce's idea of firstness, secondness and thirdness (Peirce 2000).

The level of thirdness is reached when humans co-operate – that is, when they share a common goal, and communicate and cognise accordingly. Tomasello and Rakoczy (2009) estimate that by around four years old, most children are able to utter intentional propositions – that is, propositions made up of a meta-level proposition containing psychological verbs like "believe, think, know" and an object level proposition that complements the former (2009: 721-724). This is the function of shared intentionality (see Table 1: line 3, cell 3).

The level of secondness, human communication, is shaped by shared intentionality. It is laid down in the pre-linguistic capability of infants to carry out proto-imperative and proto-declarative gestural communicative acts (Rakoczy and Tomasello 2008). This is the level of empathy as a necessary condition for shared intentionality (see Table 1, line 2, cell 3).

The level of firstness, human cognition, is, eventually, shaped by empathy. I call this capability reflexivity (see Table 1: line 1, cell 3). Human reflexion enables humans to reflect upon themselves, and to reflect themselves as part of a bigger picture – i.e., from the immediate social system all the way up to society itself. The actions of members towards other members of society are mediated by this "third": the structure of society.

The other cells in the table given here are filled with terms that signify several other categories of semiotic functionalities and capabilities deriving from the framework, but not to be discussed here, because of limitations of space.

Semiotic Capability	**in material systems**	**in living systems**	**in human systems**
cognition	responsiveness	affectivity	reflexivity
communication	entanglement	anticipation	empathy
co-operation	collectivity	collective intelligence	shared intentionality

Table 1: Semiotic capabilities in functional and evolutionary perspectives

Let me conclude. To my mind, empathy is a necessary step for the healing of civilisation, just as it is in Hoffmeyer's sense. But empathy needs complementation by a certain instance of shared intentionality to actually ensure a humane life in sustainable connections with all the other agents populating the world that is our homeland. By saying that, empathy is not belittled but rather put in a context that makes it still more important. I am very much indebted to Jesper, as he made me originally feel how decisive it is to deal with empathy.

References

de Waal, Frans 2009. *The Age of Empathy*. New York: Harmony Books.

Hofkirchner, Wolfgang 2002. *Projekt Eine Welt: Kognition–Kommunikation–Kooperation*. Münster: Lit-Verlag.

Peirce, Charles Sanders (2000). Semiotische Schriften. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Rakoczy, Hannes; Tomasello, Michael 2008. Kollektive Intentionalität und kulturelle Entwicklung. *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 56(3), 401–410.

Tomasello, Michael; Rakoczy, Hannes 2009. Was macht menschliche Erkenntnis einzigartig? In: Schmid, Hans Bernhard; Schweikard, David P. (eds.), *Kollektive Intentionalität*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.