

Paths in dialogue: on the tracks of a Subject in becoming

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ABSTRACT. – The authors describe the journey of a group of psychoanalysts from the *Società Italiana di Psicoanalisi della Relazione* (SIPRe) that, from the 1980s to the present, has led to the hypothesis of a theory based on a unitary Subject in becoming. To the concept of Relation, understood not in a phenomenal sense but as structuring the psyche and individual behavior, were juxtaposed, with reference to the development of the human being, the moments of the Hegelian dialectic – thesis, antithesis and synthesis – understood as the passage from the prereflexive to the reflexive and the self-reflexive. From this initial reflection, we then came to distinguish between direct consciousness, characteristic of the first eighteen months of life, reflective consciousness, foundational to individual identity, and self-reflective consciousness, a capacity acquired by the human, which is expressed in the narrative of oneself made to oneself and others and refers to the perception of one's own identity, based on unconscious determinants. In the group's journey, these moments of development were articulated as co-present expressions of an ongoing process, leading to the formulation of the concept of the unitary Subject in Becoming: a system, always striving toward a beyond, that self-organizes and incessantly makes itself in relationship with the other, from a perspective that frames it as coinciding with its becoming. Seeking to nurture the vital openness to future theoretical developments, its clinical implications are traced through a vignette.

Key words: Subject; system; becoming; unconscious; intersubjective.

*'This is the problem: thinking is a very unwelcome evolutionary moment;
unwelcome because it might make us feel comfortable;
unwelcome because it might make us feel uncomfortable.
It is hard to know what to do with the ability to think'*
(Bion, 1984)

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In the psychoanalytic landscape of the past fifty years, the concept of the *Subject*¹ has gained prominence; more of an intuition, as yet to be defined in depth in its theoretical connotations and clinical implications.

In this article, the human Subject is thought of as a unitary organism, with constituent functions and dimensions, self-eco-organizing (Morin, 1981) in its incessant becoming in relation to the other, in a perspective that coincidentally frames it in its becoming. Thus, a Subject animated by the need and desire to keep itself alive and vital, always striving to expand and complexify itself.

These statements are the result of theoretical-clinical research, still ongoing, on the idea of the Subject, which has been proposed and carried out over time by the Italian Society of Relational Psychoanalysis (SIPRe).

In SIPRe, the historical origin of the interest in the Subject is to be found in the *concept of Relations*², introduced in the 1970s-80s in psychoanalysis in various countries at the same time, in contrast to the lack of relevance the Object had in Freudian Metapsychology. Both the British Independents and *Infant Research* had reassessed the role of the Object in the constitution of the individual. However, both lines of research remained isolated without converging into an organic theoretical vision that would account for the constitution of a Subject not exclusively shaped by the environment, and of a relationship³ not exclusively understood as an expression of the relations structured in childhood.

The issue of the Subject at first developed intuitively, then later in an increasingly conscious manner thanks to the work of a small group of researchers who, in the mid-1980s, after a decade of informal meetings, established the SIPRe. The group was formed by scholars who, in their training, had already studied Hegelian idealism (as well as, of course, Phenomenology⁴, as the time required) and were interested not so much in the coincidence of the rational and the real, but in the conceptualization of the dialectics as a continuous amplification of consciousness, which coincided with life itself. As far as dialectics is concerned, in Hegel they found a convincing description of the journey that consciousness undertakes to reach itself in an ever fuller sense, overcoming the distinction between subject and object. In this movement, they saw a new way of understanding consciousness, involving a conception of the Subject as a unit developing through the moments of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.

¹ In this article, the term 'Subject' with a capital letter is to be understood as the organizing principle of the individual's experience.

² Cfr. De Robertis, Minolli, Tricoli (1987).

³ Cfr. Minolli (1990a, b); De Robertis, Tricoli (1990).

⁴ Including: Binswanger (1973); Heidegger (1927); Husserl (1954); Merleau-Ponty (1945).

The moment of thesis coincides with 'simple consciousness' in which the Subject, unaware of itself, is captured by the attention paid to the object/other, whom it opposes or passively identifies with; antithesis is the moment of self-consciousness in which attention is paid to itself as object, because of the return to itself that consciousness has operated; and finally, the synthesis, in which a new unit is constructed compared to the two consciousnesses that were initially separate and extraneous to one another. In Hegel's view (1807) it was the Absolute Reason that was the real protagonist of the development; on the contrary, the Group considered the Absolute Reason as an obscure intuition of a unitary Subject in becoming, in which reality was not considered merely as a mental construction. It appeared that the problem of dualism was still annoyingly open.

Interest then turned to the definition of the moments of realization of self-consciousness. In particular, the moment of unhappy consciousness reflected on the assertion of the perennial unhappiness in which the human being remained, despite having reached individual self-consciousness. For Hegel, unhappiness can be overcome once self-consciousness has acquired the awareness of being all, absolute Reason, but this seemed to entail the disappearance of the real individual.

Non-adherence to the most significant aspect of Hegelian thought, namely the coincidence of the real and the rational, originated in the cultural climate of the early 20th century dominated by Phenomenology, a movement of thought in which consciousness is essential 'intentionality', not empirical subjectivity, but the transcendental foundation of human experience. The challenge was posed by reflexivity itself: reconciling the paradox of the one with the many. How was it possible to remain oneself while welcoming the other and opening oneself to it, without involving opposition or passive adherence! The Group was not driven by philosophical interests; rather, after a critical rereading of Freudian⁵ positions, it was attracted to the world of psychoanalysis as a tool for social liberation, in relation to the historical moment (after '68), without overlooking the strong stimulus constituted in those years by the thought of Franco Basaglia.

The role of reflexive consciousness

In the light of this interest, the view of the individual that Freud had formulated, especially after 1900, was not satisfactory because it explained the unity of the human being through a partial component, the libido, which expressed a limited aspect in relation to human complexity (De Robertis,

⁵ Cfr. De Robertis (1991 e 1995); Tricoli (1992).

1996). Moreover, the classical concepts linked to an explanatory perspective of a drive nature – desire and defense, conflict between drives, or between drives and reality – did not appear sufficient to account for the tension to exist in accordance with what the ego considered consonant with its well-being, even when this placed it in conflict with the world in which it lived. The question, which one was trying to answer, was to reconcile the ego's vital need to assert itself as existing with the conflictual dimension that placed the individual in a perpetual relationship of opposition to the world, and that usually manifested itself as an open struggle or as total submission.

An initial reflection, based on the findings of *Infant Research*⁶, resulted in the distinction between simple consciousness and reflexive consciousness. *Simple consciousness* – identified afterward as pre-reflexive consciousness – was referred to the earliest affective movements, the earliest emotions and perceptions that, arising under the stimulus of external reality, are structured in the organism at a pre-reflexive level as unconscious systems (Stern, 1985), not because they are made up of repressed contents, but because they are structured before the appearance of reflexivity, when personal experience is a pure experience not referred to a subject.

Reflexive consciousness refers to the capacity to recognize oneself in the mirror, which the individual develops from the age of eighteen months. The reflexive moment is when the individual bends over himself to make himself the object of his knowledge, thus transforming both himself and himself as an object: the Subject is transformed because the individual no longer perceives himself as being at the mercy of external events, but recognizes himself as responsible for his own story; the Object is transformed because the unconscious events are arranged into a story (Montefoschi, 2004-2006).

Reflexivity is a faculty acquired evolutionarily not only by the child, who adds the reflexive function to the pre-reflexive one present at birth, but also by the whole of mankind who, some 2,700 years ago, with the appearance of the first philosophers, moved from mythical thinking to reflexive thinking: a transition from a syncretic form of perception and thought to a dichotomous mode of thought, which expresses itself through 'opposites', according to the Aristotelian laws of identity, non-contradiction and the excluded third.

With the appearance of reflexive consciousness, the relationship between the individual and the environment changes, acquiring the value of an evaluation, albeit unconscious, between personal criteria and criteria conveyed from outside (family, society, culture) (Minolli, 2000). The con-

⁶ Including: Sander (1983); Stern (1985); Trevarthen e Hubley (1978); Trevarthen (1979).

tinuous confrontation that life proposes between personal evaluations and those coming from the other, opens up a space of freedom for the human being, who is urged to choose whether to accept the input and transform him/herself, re-modelling to some extent the self-image perceived until that time or, on the contrary, to remain firm in the existing self-image.

Over time, the reflexive level is complexified in the dialectical overcoming of the Ego/other dichotomy through the function of presence to oneself. This is the level of self-reflexivity, or return to self, according to the Hegelian definition, which consists of the human being's ability to refer to him/herself what he/she has elaborated in reflexive terms, through the construction of narratives about him/herself and others (Grotstein, 2007). The unconscious events, which have arranged themselves into a story, through the self-reflexive function unravel into meaningful narratives.

The differentiation, within the psychic activity, between personal and externally induced evaluations was intended both to emphasize the active role of the individual in the development of their subjectivity⁷, and to free the Subject from the tendency – widespread above all in American psychoanalysis (in the wake of the British Independents) – to assign a decisive role to the Object, which, instead, was present in Freudian theory mostly as a means for drive discharge. It would have been necessary to delineate the moments of the constitution of the Ego, understood not in the common meaning of the term, but as a unitary Subject, which was neither the passive result of external forces, such as the pressure of society and culture, nor identifiable exclusively with the part of the ego-free from the conflicts of Hartmannian memory.

A direction of research that remained central. The consequence of this approach, initially more interested in the affairs of the Subject than in interaction with the Object, was the observation that the feeling of self-perception, under the stimulus of the diversity of the other, with the advent of reflexive consciousness begins to organize itself into systems of thought and beliefs that act as a filter for subsequent experiences, determining behavior and relationships, but also physical manifestations and somatic characteristics, in a perspective that unifies soma and psyche as two sides of the same coin.

The result of this reflection was the draft of a theory that had at its center the concepts of Subject and relationship as structuring identity. By identity was meant the perception of self, structured in early relationships on an unconscious basis, because it preceded the advent of reflexivity⁸. By

⁷ *Subjectivity* can be understood as that which remains stable over time in the subject: the capacity to perceive feelings, to make use of reflexivity, beyond the contents through which it expresses them; and, above all, the tension towards a 'beyond' that coincides with life itself.

⁸ Cfr. Minolli (2006).

Subject, it was meant the hierarchical continuum of forces and structures present at every level of individual organization, in the line of the Freudian Ego of the Project for a Psychology (1892-1899). In fact, the intuition was circulating that it was not sufficient to refer to the Ego as an 'instance' that connects the inside to the outside, or that mediates between intrapsychic instances, as was commonly accepted in the psychoanalytic theory, but that it was necessary to understand the human being more fully from an existential point of view. This led to the definition of the Subject as a unitary referent of experience (Di Francesco, 1998): an embodied structure in its historical-evolutionary bearing and a personal narrative produced by the interactions that constituted it (Minolli, 1993). However, there was not yet a full awareness that the term 'identity' did not merely refer to the perception of a stable self-image linked to a precise moment in development; rather, it was highlighting the *experience* of one's own being as a continuously evolving presence in the relationship.

The Subject as an autopoietic unitary system

The subject-object dichotomy, which has characterized modern thinking, has always also been a soma-psyche, feeling-reason, matter-spirit, individual-external world dichotomy. In the classical world, but also later in the Christian context, it was resolved by attributing the unity of being and knowledge to the Absolute, of which the human being was only a pale shadow. Later, after Descartes, it was apparently solved by abolishing one of the two terms of the problem: either subjective sensations or rational thinking. Since the last century, also thanks to the acquisitions of neuroscience, the need has been strongly felt to arrive at a unitary and processual vision of the human being, as a reaction to the static vision of the Absolute, replacing the 'all already given' with the search for understanding the systems of meaning structured in the relationship that, during the encounter with the other, as in the analytical relationship, emerge and can broaden their meanings.

An answer to this need was found in the notion of 'system' (De Robertis, 2005), which originated in the logical-mathematical and cybernetic spheres in the 1930s and was then extended to other fields, also thanks to the work of Gestalt psychologists and ecologists, revolutionizing theories on the nature and functioning of living beings. To this subversion of perspective should be added the contribution of the concept of relativity, which transformed the field of physics, as well as the development of quantum physics, which led to seeing the universe as a network of relations that could only be defined through their connections to the whole.

The system was understood as a physical and functional unit, made up of parts interacting with each other and with other systems, aimed at maintaining

itself in existence (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Maturana and Varela, 1980; Thelen and Smith, 1994; Sander, 2002; Seligman, 2005).

By applying the notion of system to the subject, its unity was guaranteed. From the notion of system to that of autopoietic system, the step was short. There was already a hunch that the Subject, in its increasingly conscious journey to attribute meanings, should be a system that continually redefines itself, maintaining and reproducing itself and also transforming itself as is proper to every living system. Its transformations could not be explained as a function of environmental stimuli, since they were due to its self-organization as a fundamental characteristic of the system itself and, therefore, of the Subject (Maturana and Varela, 1980). Following this perspective, it was evident that the environment could not have an instructive influence on living beings and on the human being.

The living being is ‘an ‘open whole’, a ‘substance’ that is its own ‘act’, that is, a process of individuation [...] which is the subject itself in its incessant making and unmaking [...]’ (Ronchi, 2012, p. 49). This does not mean that the individual, in order to maintain his existence, should not interact with other systems, but that, by interacting, he continually transforms himself in order to keep himself alive, developing those tools that the particular environment, at that particular moment, provide for him, in an ever reciprocal and transitory relationship.

Just as the notion of system guarantees the unity of the subject, the notion of autopoiesis guarantees its autonomy. ‘*The organism interacts with the environment in a ‘cognitive’ manner in that it ‘creates’ its environment and the environment enables the realization of the organism*’ (Capra and Luisi, 2014, p. 174)⁹. In other words, the subject moves through continuously evolving possible configurations in the contingencies of a specific environment, maintaining its basic organization despite the continuous transformation of its structure (Maturana and Varela, 1980). In fact, it is inherent to the system to maintain a functional equilibrium between its constituent components – the tensegrity (Sander, 2002) or *coherence*. At the same time, the system constantly presents unforeseen properties that cannot be predicted, resulting from the interaction of its subsystems or the interaction of the system with other systems. This is what happens in the process of self-eco-organization conceptualized by Edgar Morin (1981), which involves a continuous confrontation with the other. The Subject develops, in fact, not in solitary meditation, but in the

⁹ From another vantage point, Georg Northoff (2021), on the basis of recent neuroscientific research, states that when we experience reality in our consciousness, ‘we experience the way in which the waves of the world are transformed and manifested in the neuro-waves of the brain, and the way in which these, in turn, are transformed into mental waves, generating consciousness and the self.’ (*ibid.*, p. 177).

encounter with the environment, in a continuous relationship with the dimensions¹⁰ in which it is articulated.

The self-reflexive Subject and its tension towards a ‘beyond’

As affirmed by the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction that permeates all our Western thought, reflexivity implies a development through affirmation and negation, through opposing polarities. The return to the self, then, as a moment of synthesis in which the Subject expresses itself in the self-reflexive dimension that is proper to it, cannot dissolve the polarities, but it can certainly change the quality of their relationship, as well as the quality of the relationship between the parts and the whole of the entire system. Self-reflexivity is about the dialogue with oneself and with the other, which can be achieved and exercised when one’s own experiences are actively taken on as elements in the continuous exchange that unravels ceaselessly in the self/other relationship. A dialogue, at once interior and intersubjective¹¹, in which even the unawareness of one’s own experiences offers itself as a possible sense of what is happening to us.

Within the subjective becoming, the concept of ‘synthesis’ or ‘return to self’ should also be highlighted as a moment of development that also implies an understanding through symbolic thought.

Unlike the sign, which induces thinking in terms of semantic equivalences or irreconcilability, the *symbol* seems to indicate not so much a univocal meaning but rather disparate nuances and meanings, even mostly contradictory to each other: from natural and social facts to intrapsychic events. The symbol seems to perform the function of a synthesizer of opposites, linking in a dynamic duality of a tensional nature seemingly irreconcilable elements, conscious and unconscious polarities, which include the Ego¹². Symbolic

¹⁰ The reference here is to the ‘macro’ aspects in which it is possible to recognize the articulation of the subjective becoming: the totality of an undifferentiated unconscious (the function of thought, irreducible to the implicit and repressed), the implicit and pre-reflexive aspects, the reflexive and self-reflexive aspects, the intersubjective dimension proper to the constitutively relational nature of the human being.

¹¹ The *self-reflexive* and *intersubjective* co-reflexive dimensions, to be understood as constituent and interacting dimensions of the Subject, will be taken up again later as research strands in the SIPRe thinking.

¹² For the sake of clarity, it is necessary to distinguish the Subject, which tends to realise itself, through its continuous autopoietic activity of complexification, from the Ego, which constitutes its provisional realisation at a given historical moment of development. Outlining this distinction is not intended to introduce a new dualism, but is necessary to differentiate, on a theoretical level, within the unity of the becoming Subject its historically perceptible manifestations (Tricoli, 2018).

thought is, thus, a proceeding through the composing of oppositions, in such a way that each opposite is enlivened in relation to the other.

Symbolic activity is closely connected with the unconscious dimension, which refers not only to the implicit/pre-reflexive unconscious and the dynamic unconscious; it is also a function of thought that allies itself with the human need to overcome limits. From this point of view, the self-reflexive synthesis of the subject's return to itself is to be understood not as an annulment, but as the virtuous composition and tension of opposites which, thanks to symbolic activity, stimulates the Ego to contact new meanings broader than those which it has hitherto accepted, moving the Subject beyond the already given.

To sum up, over a period of about twenty years, the group had come to believe that the self-reflexive dimension emerged in human beings through the reflexive faculty. Development, however, does not occur through stages or phases, since, once they appear, the different dimensions of consciousness coexist and interact with each other throughout life. In the dialectical movement, the self-reflexive dimension manifests itself through personal awareness of one's own psychic experience, arranged in the narration made to oneself and to others, in a unitary set of identity meanings, which the individual tends to maintain because they constitute all that he/she perceives him/herself to be: something inalienable, otherwise he/she would lose him/herself (Minolli and Tricoli, 2004).

Up to this point, the Group's shared path is divided into two different but complementary strands of interest. On the one hand, the concept of becoming in the uniqueness of the self-reflexive Subject, which frees itself from dependence on the outside in order to find within itself creative capacities for affirmation (Minolli, 2015). On the other, research has focused on the ways in which the continuous dialectical exchange develops between two Subjects who meet in the analysis room (Tricoli, 2018); an exchange that takes place under the auspices of the search for intersubjectivity.

From this point on, this paper will deal with the evolution of the second direction whose roots lie in the common search for a definition of the Subject, taken as a unitary system in the process of becoming, striving towards an ever fuller and more coherent realization of its being, as 'human' (Tricoli, 2020).

The intersubjective dimension as constitutive of the Subject

By unitary Subject in the process of becoming, we not only mean the individual integrated in their dimensions, which always tend towards greater complexification and integration, but also the individual in relation to others; where other is other than self or, perhaps, not yet self.

Becoming is a constant process of integration, overcoming of boundaries

and transformation of the levels of coherence achieved (Tronick, 1998), in a species-specific process that is actualized each time, in which each individual realizes themselves through the opportunity offered by the presence of the other, in a shared experiential-emotional field, which does not annul individual differences, but allows each one to reorganize themselves at a new level of coherence. A reorganization that does not lessen the tension of the process, but transforms it into a method of living.

The choices the Subject makes when encountering a stimulus, keep its configuration or organization intact, as Maturana and Varela (1980) would say, or its subjectivity, as one might rightly say today.

As scientific research states (Prigogine and Stengers, 1981; Oyama, 1998; Seligman, 2017), we do not change in our interaction with the outside world in a linear and predictable way. Each Subject evolves in multi-determined trajectories open to multiple directions, constructing in autopoietic ways its own reality and that of the world around it; a reality we never fully grasp, as it is always changing¹³.

In this movement, it is interesting to consider the very human ways in which the process takes place.

Unlike other living beings, man defines himself in relation to the beliefs and values he has acquired, the 'choices' that have led him to consolidate the ways of being and behaviour that have appeared functional to him in living life on an identity and relational level, whether positive or negative in the eyes of outsiders. Faced with the new and the different, the human being determines himself based on the available resources, integrating into an increasingly significant unity aspects of him/herself that become more and more complex (but are also simplified, where they become increasingly intuitively evident to the Subject). In this way, going through increasingly complex moments of synthesis, one builds a 'sense of self', constantly lost and regained, in a process of continuous deconstruction of the coherence achieved and the construction of a new, more complex coherence. This process takes place, from the very beginning of the individual's life, in their relationship with the world, under the stimulus of a perceived novelty or diversity: the other.

As Paolo Cozzaglio (2022) states, every human Subject is an intersubjective Subject from the womb, 'but becomes aware of it as consciousness develops' (*ibid.*, p. 69).

A theory, which attempts to define a unitary Subject in becoming, must then be accompanied by a vision that also considers two subjects in relation

¹³ This line of thought entails abandoning the finalist perspective in favour of an integrated view, according to which evolution is a story of possibilities, without assuming that the emerging quality must be the 'best' one (Pievani, 2019).

as a unitary intersubjective system, whose reality opens up the phenomenal and existential dimensions to the gaze of the participants.

The dynamic interlocking and exchange between two subjectivities, as occurs for example between the protagonists of the analytic scenario, always takes place in an intersubjective field, a mere field of interaction only when its multiple levels are not fully grasped. As it is possible to recognize in the Subject the co-presence of several constituent dimensions – pre-reflexivity, reflexivity, self-reflexivity – the same dimensions have also to be discerned in the intersubjective system. Indeed, it is possible to say, with a certain conviction, that intersubjectivity concerns both the interactive network in which the Subject moves, and which it, in turn, helps to compose, and the complex interweaving between our self-reflexivity and that of the other: a web of experiences and meanings in dialogue, which the subjects in relationship understand in the sensorial, affective and cognitive range, as the sense of their saying, together, to themselves and to the other: a web of experiences and meanings in dialogue whose sensory, affective and cognitive range is grasped by the subjects in relationship as a sense of their saying, together, to themselves and to each other.

It is possible to state that the Subject and the world – assuming such a clear-cut separation between the two terms is still possible today – are always in interaction, in a relationship of dependence, indeed of interdependence, as a vital dimension, since the world too, like the Subject, transforms and becomes through the autopoietic activity of individuals. An activity that is always relative to the level of complexity that a particular Subject has reached within the experiences of relationships that it has lived and towards which it is moved, driven by the need for mirroring and recognition, proper to the human being and inherent to its development. Thus, if on the one hand there are forms of dependence linked to the reality of the human condition that can favour the development of the Subject (relationships between couples, relationships at work, caring relationships, educational relationships, *etc.*), on the other hand, since the process of autopoietic creation takes place through the acquisition of unconscious aspects in the relationship with the other, the Subject, by settling on the Ego, can direct its development towards a dimension of closure in its emotional aspects and/or in its rational aspects, slowing down its journey to complexification. However, the use of the verb ‘to slow down’ may be misleading, suggesting that there are predefined times and manner for the path of life.

The reflexive faculty, in fact, allows for an ever-increasing process of individuation, in the constant differentiation from the other; however, at the same time, it locks in a form of polarised thinking, the cause of absolutization and tension. This occurs because the first meaning systems that the Subject constructs are inevitably polarised and remain so until the other is discovered as a Subject of equal importance, albeit structured on different meanings, often

not coinciding with its own. Forgoing the absoluteness of one's own system of meanings, structured over a lifetime because it is experienced as functional to what is considered one's own well-being, is not a simple operation, nor is it easy. It requires a long process of accepting the uncertainty of the human condition and its inherent limitation, linked to being mortal, to having a beginning and an end.

However, it is inherent in life itself that the sense of limitation, initially perceived as a defect and a shortcoming, is transformed into a propulsive urge to go further, not as a reckless form of *hubris* but as a vital drive towards what has not yet been realized.

Change as crisis

At this point it is inevitable to ask what is meant by a Subject in becoming, that remains itself, not being determined by external causes but always being in constant relation with the other.

A Subject that becomes is a Subject that changes. But changes by virtue of what? Development can be considered the result of two modes of interaction of the system's components: coordination and synchronization, which, when realized, place the system in a condition of static, but provisional and unstable equilibrium (Maffei, 2021). As soon as synchronization and coordination fail – and this is what happens continuously due to the constant perturbations in which the system is immersed – the system goes into crisis mode and feels the urge to seek a new equilibrium. Change, which the search for equilibrium entails, can be viewed as relating to the crisis and, at the same time, as a vital movement of every living system, including the human system. In this sense, crisis always implies development, irrespective of the positive or negative value that can be attributed to it. Moreover, it should be understood in processual and non-linear terms, as it is the very feature of complex systems, which is today, at least in our opinion, the best conception we have of the idea of a unitary Subject in becoming. Considering, therefore, the human being as a system¹⁴ whose development follows the course described, it is possible to state that every choice he feels called upon to make involves a crisis, since in the system, on encountering a perturbation caused by contact with alterity, there will always emerge an alteration of the equilibrium achieved. In such a condition, the system's components will no

¹⁴ The human being is a system if one considers him to be made up of functional parts whose value has meaning in relation to the whole of which they are part. At the same time, the human being is a metaphor for a system since it cannot be understood in its totality since, being in continuous change, it eludes a static definition.

longer interact in a synchronous and co-ordinated manner, either because entropic disorder has been produced or because they are mobilized in the search for an ever-reformulated equilibrium. The crisis, which must be faced to live life, will therefore be faced with actions that the subject will assess as adequate for the purpose. In fact, it is the human subject who, stimulated by the environment and relationships, can perceive, re-see and re-signify in a qualitatively different manner the meanings he has attributed to his arrangements, making use of all his emotional and cognitive resources that he uses in relation to the capacities with which he is constitutively endowed and which he has developed in the course of his life.

The crisis may occur through an internal motion, apparently unrelated to the reality of the moment, or as a reaction to an external stimulus; but, in all cases, it concerns the relational dimension of the human being. We continually are and continually become; and the relational web in which we are immersed constantly exhorts us in terms of opening-closing, movement-stasis, instability-balance.

That which is perceived as otherness can be experienced by the Subject in a perturbing way, leading them to move to the other with rejection or identification because the first approach is almost inevitably one of mutual dependence and polarization of one's own beliefs. The emotion of extraneousness, which we experience as a threat to the integrity of our person and/or to the value of the identity truth that has accompanied us so far in our existence, arouses annoyance, rejection or aggression. Similarly, even when the other at an immediate and pre-reflective level is perceived as identical or extremely familiar, the identity self-image becomes static as an unquestionable truth in the system of acquired meanings and in the historical solutions adopted. At this point, the subject's evolutionary process changes direction, manifesting itself through an unease that is perceived and identified as pathology. In this sense, pathology is not so much a departure from an ideal criterion of normality, but rather the stalemate in which the Subject finds itself when it rigidifies on solutions that were previously functional, not identifying the possibility of facing the crisis and opening up to the new (Tricoli, 2018). In other words: pathology is structured during the development, where the processual and transformative nature of subjectivity is flattened by identification with the Ego.

There may be pain and suffering in the change and crises that characterize the becoming of the Subject (Minolli, 2009), but the pathology is represented by the persistence of the Subject's modes of functioning (systems of meaning, ways of feeling and behaving in relation to the world) that are functional to the maintenance of a static equilibrium, experienced as the only one possible. This is what the literature on diagnosis tries to understand when it highlights clinical syndromes (suffering understood as a crisis of the system) in the context of the individual's personality. 'If we wish to

understand symptoms, we need to know something about the person who harbors them' (Westen *et al.*, 2006, p. 87).

The intersubjective becoming of the Subject: towards a clinical theory

A theory based on the Unitary Subject in becoming has precise clinical indications.

First, it is necessary to listen attentively and continuously to the other in order to identify the organizers or basic themes, which are often covered up by our tendency to pay attention to what strikes us about the other because it is familiar, and which represents only one aspect of that specific and complex singularity.

What we initially understand about the patient, and understand through projection – here to be taken in its dialectical and perspectival sense as a cognitive process of what still needs to be known in us and which we attribute to the other – is what we have at least partly understood about ourselves and which we have at least partly managed to modify. At the same time, it is also what we deprive ourselves of in our inter-subjective evolutionary tension; the rest eludes us, and we have to embark on a long journey of oversights, rash hypotheses and mutual misunderstandings, in order to finally understand the meaning it has for the other, who is always different, not totally comprehensible through defined diagnostic categories. Behind any experience or belief or behavior, which appears to the analyst to be illogical or dysfunctional to the patient's well-being, there is always an unconscious motivation, structured in significant relationships and consolidated afterwards, which has acquired for the patient a functionality in relation to maintaining a meaningful relationship with others and/or with oneself as an identity image.

This represents the implicit and relational dimension of our process of getting to know the patient, and does not detract from the value of the other two dimensions that are traditionally considered for a clinically useful diagnosis in psychotherapy: the nosographic (nomothetic) dimension and the idiographic dimension, which is functional to the individualized formulation of the clinical case (Albasi, 2009; Dazzi *et al.*, 2009; Fontana, 2012, 2017; Lingiard e McWilliams, 2017, Cozzaglio, 2022). The former helps us to recognize the level, the quality, the type of suffering that we see in the patient, in the context of his organization as a person (a recognition that is only possible by bearing in mind a nosography, a 'panorama' of types of people and ways of being ill, possible in our age and culture). The latter allows us to arrange in a story the multitude of information that invades us from the first contact with the patient, and to give meaning to our narrative of who he is as a person, in his uniqueness and in his life pathway.

These ways of knowing also become part of our ways of understanding the

other (and ourselves); ways that we structure and reorganize throughout our lives, as baggage acquired during our long training as therapists. They settle within us and help us reflect on what we perceive, re-know, and what we seem to understand based on the assumptions we – often implicitly – formulate.

Reaching the other in the deep motivations that are the cause of unhappiness for him, and for those in relationship with him, always requires a long and patient journey, not without suffering. For the analyst, because of the relative narcissism that is common to all those who dedicate themselves to this profession, the initial suffering is the frustration of not reaching the patient, who seems to oppose the exchange, or clings to it passively. In addition, one must consider the impelling desire to remove the suffering of those who have turned to us for help, by offering contents that appear more functional and resolving.

But the other remains a mystery (Levinas, 1948): his face is revealed to the extent that our eyes are opened, sometimes suddenly, because of a long search for a shared meaning always in becoming. It is as if the two who meet in the analysis room are speaking two foreign languages and at times they become a common language, lost and regained cyclically over time as in a spiral, at increasingly complex levels. This jointly constructed reality is not an alternative to its own truth, nor is it a negotiated reality, the result of a synthesis between the two realities. There is no definitive and static truth about us and the other since what is constructed with the patient is, rather, in becoming: an incessant movement aimed at developing potentialities in the two Subjects in the relationship.

A clinical vignette is presented here to illustrate this point.

Carlo is an established 45-year-old professional who asks for analysis because of a kind of deep dissatisfaction, both towards his work and his emotional life. He is a manager in an international company, so he is often abroad. He likes his work, although he feels that he is not really understood by his co-workers and finds it hard to restrain his annoyance towards those whom he does not consider particularly capable or brilliant. Sometimes he becomes caustic in his reactions. He has been married for ten years; he describes his relationship with his wife as not problematic, although they spend little time together, but – he says – perhaps not problematic for that very reason. He has two children of whom he is proud but, because of his work, he is unable to share with them the important moments of their lives, such as school or sports.

The analyst is ten years older than the patient; he is dedicated and passionate about his work. He expects to achieve good results with his patients and usually does. With Carlo he cannot get passionate. He feels Carlo is distant, caught up in purely concrete considerations, prone to judgement and to contempt which, for the analyst, is a sign of a desire for profound acceptance that the patient has dismissed without even clearly perceiving its absence, at least

apparently. The feeling he experiences is one of distance, which turns first into frustration and then into boredom.

In accordance with his working method, the analyst questions his own perceptions and experiences in order to formulate hypotheses about the patient. The first conclusion he reaches – which seems obvious to him – is that he is not attracted to a patient by whom he does not feel valued and is therefore frustrated in his own ‘narcissistic’ desire to be acknowledged for his own worth. Although this consideration is understandable to the analyst considering his recognition of the patient’s narcissistic mode of functioning, as well as his understanding of the underlying issue and its possible reasons, the relationship with the patient does not change and the sessions drag on wearily.

As for the setting, sometimes, when the patient is abroad, sessions take place online. One day the analyst, trying to survive the boredom of the repetitive reports of the working day, has the impression that the patient is not really participating in the session, but that he is looking at his agenda or attending to something else. This time, however, he does not feel a feeling of contrariness, frustration or helplessness as in the past. Something new happens: a burning feeling of disappointment comes over him.

As he wonders how to communicate his experience to the patient, the patient suddenly says: ‘It has occurred to me that as a child, in primary school I suppose, I often felt a feeling of deep disappointment when, as often happened, I was not chosen to take part in sports competitions, school plays, or sometimes not even invited to the parties of my classmates. I didn’t understand why I should always be excluded, but I really felt bad about it; I spent a lonely childhood. Then, fortunately, in high school I learnt to stand up for myself and it was different.’

At this point the analyst actually ‘hears’ him, and understands how the distance that Carlo has ‘learnt’ to interpose between himself and others has had the function of allowing him to find a place in the world, perceived as disinterested and frustrating; an acceptable, even successful place, which guaranteed for him the acceptance of others and a certain feeling of identity value. He also understands, in that undefined and extremely involving fragment of intersubjectivity that is created in the analytical relationship, to what extent Carlo, by repeating his way of being structured from childhood, was unconsciously asking to be seen and accepted for what he was. He understands to what extent he himself, up to that moment, had only given the patient the acceptance that his profession requires, rational, intentional, even partly felt, but not founded on a real understanding.

Now the analyst can feel the suffering that pervades Carlo’s life, linking it to the meaning of an ancient experience, still unknown to the patient, which can be shared implicitly in the relationship, not interpreted or rationally communicated through a state of mind that will no longer be one of annoyance and therefore, in turn, of distance.

To reach the other as a Subject, at a level of interaction that can be defined as intersubjectivity, it is not enough to have a rational, meticulous, attentive and dedicated approach; one needs to fully involve oneself in a web of perceptions and feelings that are interwoven with the patient's experiences and with all the affective bearing of deep meanings that give meaning to what each individual – patient and analyst – feels they are and do not want to lose. It is therefore an understanding that is at once emotional, unconscious and reflexive and allows one to experience the other in their diversity.

The analyst is a 'wounded healer' (Sedgwick, 1993), bearer of an eternal *vulnus*: on the one hand, the *limit* of his human and living being, on the other his faithfulness to the method that requires him to go beyond; that encourages him to invent ever new contents (the theories) and to travel along paths with ever different steps (the techniques). If there is something that perhaps the analyst knows – and knows very well, continuing to discover it every day – it is that life is a suffered but also joyful perception of our limits, an urge to go beyond, a new perception of a more rooted limit, and so on. Always. Thus the analyst becomes a *stimulus* for the other to discover their own potential as a healer, and not the *cause* of this discovery (Tricoli, 2012).

To have as a theoretical referent a unitary Subject in becoming, that structures itself in the intersubjective dimension, is a remarkable paradigm shift, which is beginning to be defined with the concurrence of various fields of research.

After the development of 20th century thought, while recognizing its value, it is no longer possible to share the positivistic assumptions that characterize Freudian theory. There are two main aspects that seem discordant with the world view that is emerging today. The first is the philosophical assumption of an objective absolute, static and already given, which only needs to be discovered, to the extent that human capacities are capable of. A perspective that has endured over the centuries, from Greek philosophy to scholasticism and that, in more recent times, even appears in Kantian thought. The other aspect relates to the idea that the one who has more knowledge – an analyst is 'supposed to know' – can foster real change in the other only by communicating that knowledge, without putting pressure on the emotional aspects of communication, and on the dynamic interlocking always present at various levels between analyst and patient.

On the contrary, what we have said so far allows us to see the complexity of the analytical dialogue as a space of multifaceted possibilities that not only shapes itself on the differences of the Subjects who co-create it and by whom they are co-created at the same time, but also delineates the role of the other always as a possibility and not the reason for transformation. This restores equal dignity to the Subjects in the field and gives the analyst the responsibility to constantly work on himself, following a method based on sufficiently

open and explicit theoretical assumptions about an idea of the human being as an individual who becomes together with others.

It seems then that the time has come to begin elaborating, alongside the theory of the unitary Subject in becoming, the theory of a unitary intersubjectivity in becoming, finally overcoming the subject-object/subject-world dualism that the reflexivity inherent in thought and language inevitably forces us to assume.

Could this be a new omen for us humans and for further developments in psychoanalysis? As Kenneth Gergen (1991) said, we have an ‘extremely poor language of relationship’ (quoted in Aron, 1996, p. 161). We never talk about the fact that it is the relationships, the field we co-construct with the other – that demand expectations, hope and fear. It is not surprising then that it is intersubjectivity that escapes the grasp of a theoretical definition. Not least because we are dealing with that intimate, absurd and still unspeakable experience, continuous and always changing, that we already have anyway with the other and that allows us to contact, at the same time, the limit and the infinite trespass to which becoming together has destined us.

Aware of our limits and of a tension towards beyond that distinguishes us as humans in becoming, we have the task of deconstructing the certainties linked to old models (epistemic, theoretical, cultural) to reconfigure them and integrate them into the new perspectives that the reality we live in requires us to recognize. Only in this way, perhaps, can we contribute to that recognition of human complexity that makes us together always open to the other and to otherness.

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