

11 The reactive

Social experiences of surface and depth

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Introduction: a return on relationalism

Imitation, suggestion and contagion are all diffusive phenomena that globally affect social ensembles in a dynamic way. These events typically occur inside and throughout compositions of associated members – what we may also call a *social multiplicity*, or an ensemble of consociates. From this perspective, diffusive phenomena are like *waves* that sail through such multiplicities, sometimes smoothly, at other times like sudden upsurges. In other words, we have an intuitive sense that, as a result of mimetic phenomena, *something* spreads around within a social multiplicity, although we don't know how to precisely conceptualize that 'something' – least, how to describe the moment when it is passed on from one to another. The metaphor of the wave, in particular, points toward the intimate connection of the social parts being taken within an overall movement of diffusion. The social bond in its purest and simplest realization is at stake here; in fact, what is entailed in imitation, suggestion and contagion is a social 'nexus' that flows through the individuals as well as the group, inextricably joining the parts and the whole.

To order to clarify this nexus, it could be interesting to probe how globally diffusive events such as for instance a specific mood spreading through a crowd, or the trivial practice of 'liking' or 'retweeting' a social media content one has just read, look like *from the perspective of the parts involved*. This amounts to interrogating how the individuals belonging, taking part in, or entering those ensembles get a first-hand experience of imitation, suggestion and contagion. My hypothesis is that, in order to tackle this question, we may benefit from de-familiarizing commonsensical notions of individuality and narrow psychological modeling of the individual. One way to do so – at least, the way that will be attempted in these pages – is to zoom in onto the notions of action and reaction as they intersect individual life at the moment when it joins social life – that is, the existence of social multiplicities. The verb 'intersect', in particular, may help to emphasize how the individual seems to feature as simultaneously a *source* and a *point of application* of action and reaction.

The notion of reaction, in particular, has been quite discredited in sociology. In the introduction to this volume, Christian Borch has well reconstructed Weber's dismissal of imitation as being 'merely reactive' and not quite counting as proper social action, although his thoughts on the matter seem to have never been conclusive. As suggested by the editor himself, this chapter can be read as an attempt to image how individuality, sociality, and interaction might have been conceived of if sociology had not uncritically followed Weber's conceptual scheme with its opposition of active action and passive reaction. In twentieth-century sociology, the paradigm of *interaction* has asserted itself as a way to grapple with the complex loops of action and reaction that contradistinguish what happens in social ensembles. It is important to remark, however, that interaction is a way of considering such complexes of actions and reactions that abstains from deciding what is causing what, and which is a means to which end. The prism of interaction is very cautious and avoids proclaiming any causal connection, so that the distinction between the source and the point of application remains undecided. This is why anyone looking strictly for causal nexuses will find the Solomonic notion of interaction to be a very tricky tool. Certainly, once we break down interaction into connections of action and reaction, we are left with but the two halves of a single puzzle. In other words, the puzzle to be faced is actually relational, and only a thinking of relations may help to advance into it. Yet, instead of positing the relational as an article of faith – a veritable Kantian synthetic a priori judgment – it could be interesting to observe how the relational emerges from within, and establishes itself between, the social parts at stake (which are themselves in the process of being constituted by the experience). De-familiarizing commonsensical notions of individuality thus ultimately offers a way to deepen relationalism – still, through a significant detour.

In this chapter, I begin with a reconstruction of the rise and fall of the notion of reaction in the social science; I then elaborate on the motives why reaction has been rejected and define the features of the 'reactive condition', drawing in particular from the work of Pierre Janet. This helps me to specify, in the final part of the chapter, how reaction is connected to the diffusive processes of imitation, suggestion, and contagion.

From reaction to action, and back

Action and reaction constitute a model of understanding that is wide-ranging in the physical, biological, psychological, and sociological domains. As Starobinski (1999) has put it, while action and reaction are generally imagined as opposite to each other, they in fact form an almost unbreakable 'theoretical couple'. A curious couple indeed, with a very old term and a relatively young one: from a historical-terminological point of view, Starobinski explains, 'action' (from the Latin *ago, -ere*) is an ancient term that was originally related to the activity of leading the livestock in the open

fields by the daylight, whereas 'reaction' is a term that only appears in the lower Middle Ages.

The notion of reaction first features in an alchemical context, then makes its fortune in the early modern scientific lexicon – to the point of becoming ubiquitous and trivialized by the nineteenth century – and is later turned into a political category during the French revolution. Classical antiquity had only two words for, respectively, the active and the passive aspect of a deed, namely, *actio* and *passio* (in Greek, *poiein* and *paskhein*). In this respect, reaction can be said to emerge as a third, 'modern' pole between the two 'classical' poles of action and passion (one could also venture to say, using a Deleuzian terminology, that reaction embodies a specific 'perversion' of the action/passion dichotomy). On the one hand, reaction appears to be no less active than action; on the other, however, it lacks the freedom of initiating action, given that it only exists in response to a previously deployed action. Reaction thus appears as a special type of subordinate action, whose specificity lies in standing somehow in contrast to – or even being cast against – a previous action: action in response, a veritable 'retro-action'.¹

It is possible to observe how, in the modern period, action and reaction are interwoven with issues of imitation, suggestion and contagion. In the case of imitation, the individual is regarded as reacting to a social stimulus by replicating a gesture or act first made by its model; in the case of suggestion, the individual is seen as reacting by unconsciously complying with the received stimulation, which is thereby prolonged; then, with contagion, the individual appears as flooded by a series of acts or stimulations (conceptualized as 'infections'), so that its reaction consists in actually being overcome by them and yet simultaneously becoming an active carrier of those same stimulations (typically, the fact of being bitten by a vampire turns one into another vampire, so that the vampiristic contagious disease may continue to be spread around). As we know, the late nineteenth-century voices infinite concerns for the fate of the 'responsible individual', the individual held accountable for his/her own actions vis-à-vis the threats of imitation, suggestion and contagion. A pervasive cultural narrative then sought to promote bold, assertive individuality: the individual should step out of crowd mind, be always independent in judgment (self-directed as opposed to other-directed), immune to the suggestions and the affective contagion of surrounding opinions.

In short, especially during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the liberal individual came to be projected as an ideal subject of action, capable of detaching itself from the *vices* of reactivity. It is well known how for instance English Victorian society was replete with anxieties about all types of phenomena imagined as grounded in an unbounded imitation – ranging from the crowd rallies to masturbation – that could take over one's self-countenance.² Such a condemnation of reaction is all the more curious, given that simultaneously, from a moral and political point of view, reaction seems to systematically lie on the side of innocence, as opposed to the

moral and political burdens of deliberate action. Not by chance, 'I merely reacted' is one of the most used defensive strategies in a variety of contexts ranging from fights between schoolboys to politics among nations. Still, it is significant that the moral-political condemnation of reactivity dominated at the time of the development of the human sciences. The latter could indeed be observed as a movement towards a normalization of reaction in social life, given that they led to precisely a shrinking of the space of autonomous individual action – as the study of reflexes and the theorization of the unconscious well attest. Reaction seems omnipresent as it founds the adaptation of the organism to the environment. Of course, as first remarked by Canguilhem (2015 [1951]), the exaggeration of the paradigm of reaction leads to a vision of the living being as purely mechanical – a triumph of Cartesianism that culminated in early twentieth-century behaviorism, and was later found amply insufficient.

Consequently, while it is not possible to take reaction (or, for that matter, reflex) as a self-sufficient category, this notion still represents a peculiar locus deserving analytical attention. In fact, the image of reaction is itself not unified. We may consider that, for instance, whereas in Newtonian physics action and reaction are conceptualized as *simultaneous*, *even*, and *balanced* (they only differ as oriented vectors, which anyway can be said to be manifestations of the same force), in the modern human sciences an intuitive understanding seems to have prevailed – or persisted – according to which reaction features as essentially *subsequent* to action: reaction is action *in response to* action, where the ratio between the two forces is not given a priori. Especially if we look at psychology, the balance between action and reaction appears as systematically *unsettled*. A place is created in this sense for the notion of *abreaction* – a neologism by Freud's mentor, Joseph Breuer (Breuer and Freud, 1955 [1895]), understood as the sudden expression of the psychologically repressed. Abreaction is a reaction that draws its energy from invisible sources, and the sheer possibility of abreaction shows that in psychic life there is hardly any one-to-one correspondence between actions and reactions.

This fact may help to explain why, besides the paradigm of interaction and its 'ecumenical' causal strategy recalled above, during the twentieth century the theories of action have likewise known a rich conceptual elaboration in the sociological tradition. It is just enough to recall the line of thought that stretches from Weber, through Parsons, to Elster. Simultaneously, however, in various areas in the social and behavioral sciences, reaction has also found a theoretical vindication. In general, we may say, reaction appears to take pride of place whenever individual action is observed from the perspective of the social ensemble – regardless of whether the latter is conceptualized as a 'system' or as a 'context' of action. For instance, despite their name, so-called *agent-based models* are in fact *reagent-based*, in that their purpose is to test each individual in terms of its specific reactions to changing circumstances or events that occur in its proximity. Each element of the system is thus observed as existing in a state of more or less activated reactivity.³

To the extent that individual action is comprehended as a specific 'activation' vis-à-vis series of changes in the surrounding social environment, action-chains or action-nets are more of a reactive than an active nature. Reactivity is essential to create that emergent property referred to as swarm intelligence. As hinted above, the cybernetic notion of *positive feedback* follows from a model of reaction. Alan Turing (1952) developed a reaction-diffusion model to account for the developmental regulation of complex biological tissues. Specifically, he proposed the formalization of a morphogenetic system that, starting from simple rules, leads to the formation of wide nonlinear patterns. For instance, starting from two basic biochemical agents operating in a tissue – the one promoting cell growth at short range and the other inhibiting cell growth at long range – it is possible to reconstruct the emergence of very complex patterns via feedback operations. In Turing's model, the capacity to react upon itself is clearly a distinctive property of the system. Feedback is self-reactivity. So, whereas *prima facie* action and reaction appear to be neatly distinguished, their actual separation is in many cases a matter of perspectives, as the apparently negligible difference between interaction and interreaction instills. Before Turing, Bergson (1939) in his last book had argued that the distinction between automatism and voluntary action is just a distinction of degree and not one of nature.⁴

Of surface and depth

Before inquiring more in detail into the specifically *social* condition defined by reactivity, another dimension to be included in our conceptualization deserves attention. It is the fact that the phenomena of imitation, suggestion, and contagion concern not only the 'horizontal' aspect of *diffusion*, but also the 'vertical' aspect of *affection*. Just as these phenomena reveal the intrinsic tendency of the 'social thing' to spread and circulate (to reiterate a Tardean point), they also highlight how such circulations that contradistinguish the experience of social life touch deeply into the psychological and even biological constitution of the individuals.

In this respect, two traditions in the conceptualization of social life may be briefly recalled. On the one side stand the theorists of *surfaces*, including certainly classical sociologists Simmel and Goffman, but also a zoologist like Portmann and a philosopher like Deleuze. We may say that, for all these authors, the famous saying by Valéry, 'what is most deep is the skin', applies. In this view, social life is entirely played out in the domain of the visible. Social life happens in a dimension of 'publicness', of inter-visibility. And indeed, visibility is a superficial thing: it concerns that very thin layer of the body that is going to be presented to the other. Yet, this thin layer is crucial to the whole living being: surfaces represent the sensible locus of discontinuity between the domains of the *intra-* and the *inter-individual*. It is thus the place where social meaning is generated and all operations with

meaning – such as stating, claiming, lying, hiding ... – are enacted. Social animals are so constituted that their 'inside', their 'inwardness' or 'interiority', is precisely created *at the interface* with another animal. In other words, the interface is the domain of communication. As Portmann (1990: 26) put it,

the more powerful inwardness, possessing as it does a consciousness, is ever more and more able to sense the appearance-aspect of the organism. The boundary of the organism becomes the organ of this inwardness; the very outermost speaks quite particularly of the very inmost.

Portmann makes the case that biological depths are mobilized toward the production and the performance of the surface: so, for instance, blushing is not a collateral effect of having certain capillary veins on the cheeks; on the contrary, those very capillaries have phylogenetically developed and evolved in order to make blushing possible, given that blushing possesses a significant communicative value. For his part, Deleuze recalled how Stoic philosophers first asserted the idea that language and bodies can only be connected 'at the surface' – why not, on the cheeks.

On the opposite side stand the theorists of *depths*, epitomized by the geological understanding of the psyche in Freudian theory. In psychoanalysis, not only is the unconscious figuratively imagined as lying 'beneath' the conscious (covered or screened by it) but in fact, agency is made possible by the depth of the psyche as the latter engages more or less therapeutically the process of reconstructing its own composition. In this case, the margins of maneuver possessed by any subjectivity appear to be vertical rather than horizontal. Psychic depth tends to be configured as a dynamic and continuous process. The various schemes of repression, removal, condensation (*Verdichtung*), and displacement (*Verschiebung*) elaborated by Freud in the foundational years of psychoanalysis at the end of the nineteenth century well attest this. Because the *verticality* of the psychic dynamic allows for the circulation and elaboration of psychic contents, the veritable space of maneuver for the existence of something like a 'subject' necessarily stretches in depth. The reactivity of subjectivity, in this case, becomes visible in the psychic dynamics of trauma and symptom as well as, a fortiori, in the dialogical constitution of therapeutic practice itself.

At first, one may be tempted to associate surfaces with the 'reactive' dimension at large, as opposed to depths associated with the properly 'active' dimension of existence. However, things are not so clear-cut. If one considers a curious phenomenon such as camouflage, for instance, one finds that surfaces and depths may form complex circuits where surface operations cannot be carried on without a passage through psycho-biological depth, and vice versa. Camouflage is a surface strategy, but there is always something deeply affective that goes on through it, to the point that, during this process, even the smoothest surface gets almost unmistakably thwarted

(Brighenti and Castelli, 2016). In terms of visibility, we might perhaps say that *depth* represents a *latent* phase of the psychosocial process. No less than surface, however, depth is a matter of inscription in the domain of the visible. In this sense, rather than as a variation on the intuitive dichotomy 'visible/invisible', surface and depth may be better explored as two different *registers of the visible* (Brighenti, 2017). The hypothesis advanced here is that action and reaction designate two different *regimes of social existence* that are often copresent. Such regimes in fact offer different points of view on the same social process. More precisely, from a logical as well as ontological point of view, it is possible to claim that reaction represents a *genealogy* of action and its original blueprint – despite the fact that, as seen above, *historically speaking*, reaction is a modern notion and action an ancient one.

The reactive condition

Which mode of existence is defined by the reactive condition? How can we observe action emerge and detach itself from reaction? Under which conditions does action rejoin reaction? To delve into these complex questions, it is possible to draw inspiration from the systematization offered by Pierre Janet in *The psychological evolution of personality* (2005 [1929]). Delivered as a course at the Collège de France in the later part of his career, *Evolution* is arguably one of the greatest works in twentieth-century psychology.⁵ It is also an unfortunately neglected classic both in psychology and social theory. More specifically, as far as action and reaction are concerned, Janet begins by describing the biological rooting of personality in reflexes and reflex complexes.⁶

According to Janet, personhood largely exceeds the domain of irreflexive action. Instead, Janet drew a complex map including many different degrees of psychic activity superimposed and interacting with each other: 'Only slowly have conducts been organized [...] everything has been constructed slowly and bits by bits it has been superimposed' (2005: 69).⁷ The assumption is that personhood is a cultural, historical, and social construction. It is a phylogenetically complex construction that has developed over thousands and thousands of years. This also explains why the individual can incur in many 'mistakes of individuation' – such mistakes being of course forms of psychic illness (e.g., people believing they are someone else, or believing someone else is speaking from inside them etc.). Yet Janet constantly invokes the proximity and even continuity between 'normal' and 'pathological' states, showing how several of these mistakes of individuation are incurred by psychically normal people too. In *Evolution*, the articulation of individuality is explored as an enterprise of 'unification' that unfolds at three distinct levels, including a *spatial level* (the *body*), a *social level* (*feelings*), and a *temporal level* (*memory*, self-narration). At the first level, we find organic-anatomic-physiological performances, at

the second interactive performances, and at the third fictional-memorial performances. Janet contends that 'all social conduct is reactive conduct' (2005: 173), insofar as we initially find ourselves targeted by the action of others. However, not all reaction is similar; in fact, there is a multifaceted domain of multiple connections between the many figures of personal reactivity, activity, and thought.

Exploring the bodily level of personality, Janet draws three figures. They can be presented as follows in a slightly elaborated form in order to make Janet's original insight even clearer:

Figure 11.1a represents the classic, Pavlovian view on reflexes. The reflex is based on a simple association between a Stimulation S and a Response R. The response may also be called (as Janet precisely designates it) a Movement – in any case, its nature is clearly reactive. The reflex occurs as a single *bloc of conduct*: it is enacted 'all at once'. This means that the notion of reflex is based upon a spatial imagination which specifically calls into existence a special point, the unnamed apex joining the two segments, endowed with the capacity of welding the two moments of stimulation and movement, of trigger and reaction. The apex, so to speak, *folds* together two moments in the life of the individual and brings psychophysical energy from the former moment to the latter one.

Figure 11.1b designates an interesting situation in which more reflexes are combined together. The reaction to a given stimulation now provides the basis for further stimulations, each eliciting corresponding reactions. So, the first reaction simultaneously functions as a stimulation for a second reaction, and so on. This is what Janet calls a 'reflex cascade'. It is quite common

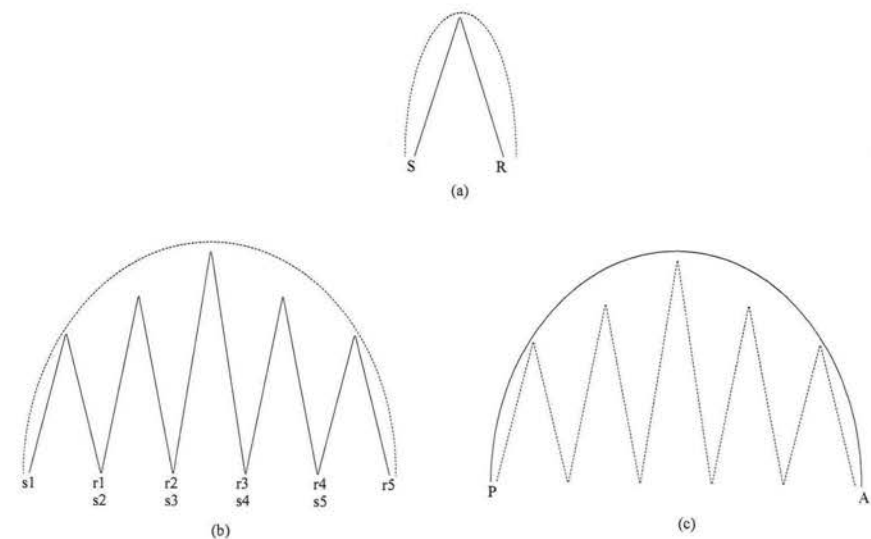


Figure 11.1 Elaboration from Janet on reflex, reflex complex, and perception.

in biological life that reactions follow in sequences and blocs. Janet takes the example of a dog hunting the game:

The dog strolling in the countryside smells in a ditch the scent of a hare, or some other wild animal; such excitation of the mucosa in the nose determines a certain reflex. It is the reflex of the search, of pointing towards the prey. Smell thus leads to marching. Now, the march creates an accident: the dog now sees the hare. The vision of the hare in turn acts as a new stimulation that comes to be added to the first one. The march is transformed into a run and a series of further specific reflexes follow. The chase causes the dog to snatch the hare and bite it. The taste of the flesh on the tongue makes an impression that breeds the reflex of mastication; the dog now masticates the hare. As pieces of meat start filling the mouth of the dog, the reflex of swallowing is activated, and the dog actually eats the hare.

(Janet, 2005: 43)

This hunting scene is a nice illustration of the second figure. The third Figure (11.1c) does not differ visually much from the previous one, yet it conveys an important conceptual difference. Indeed, 11.1c constitutes not simply a sequence of reflexes, but a 'reflex complex'. What in Figure 11.1b was virtual has now become actual in 11.1c. All intermediary reactions can be put in parenthesis and suspended – hence, dotted and continuous lines are inverted in the two pictures. In this new situation, the original reflex is *delayed* or bracketed. The beginning and the end of the arc can now be joined together in a novel way. It is a less rigid way, a less mechanic one, as the absence of any sharp apex highlights. The small step between Figures 11.1b and 11.1c is not only quantitative, but crucially qualitative. In fact, we no longer have a simple reaction, but a veritable *perception*. A simple reflex can be imagined as an arc that connects a stimulation and a movement; both moments are visible, what is invisible is just the apex itself that, so to speak, bounces the stimulus back toward its corresponding movement. On the contrary, reflex complexes can engender qualitatively distinct perceptions, contradistinguished by the existence of a gap between stimulus and response. The whole sequence of moments becomes invisible. In the first and second picture, the arc is only virtual, whereas in the third picture it has become actual. In this condition, immediate reaction – or, the irreflexive transformation of stimulation into movement – can be interrupted, better – bracketed. As Janet (2005: 44) explains:

One character of the perceptual act upon which we have placed much importance is the fact that the perceptual act is a type of act which could be called suspensive [...] These suspensive acts are global and have a peculiar property that has evolved over the centuries – namely, the fact that they can be slowed down.

The inception of perception thus affords a type of action that is no longer narrowly reactive in nature. Perception creates something that is not simply an engendered reaction – they give way to actual *action*. Whereas stimulation and reaction are continuous, perception and action are discontinuous. This distinction corresponds quite neatly to the one introduced in biology by Von Uexküll (1926) between the sphere of perception (*Merkwelt*) and the sphere of action (*Wirkwelt*) in animal life. Therefore, reaction appears as a peculiar bio-psychosocial terrain that prolongs into other domains and provides a number of further psychosocial operations with a kind of raw matter to be articulated. It is as if reaction is placed between, on the one hand, an asocial immediacy and, on the other, a social mediation. In terms of C.S. Peirce's (1931: §§302–49) three cenopythagorean categories, we may also call the reflex a *secondness* (due to the direct, causal-effectual junction of stimulation and reaction) that exists between a *firstness* (the unqualified immediacy of the absolute 'happening', such as the shock of the firing neuron) and a *thirdness* (the eminently social mediation between a perceiving and a perceptum – the third as a middle reality between a beginning and an end). As we shall see below, these three categories are not necessarily to be thought of as discontinuous; so that reactive secondness – under its respect of causation and constraint – could be seen as incessantly prolonging toward an absolute first world of pure feeling and a third world of signs and continuous mediations.

It should also be considered that the gap between perception and action has a meaningful span, beyond which another change of nature occurs. In this sense, the catatonic described by Janet offers an extreme instance of an individual who pushes the gap between perception and action to a limit where one becomes completely motionless and utterly incapable of an action whatsoever. Janet (2005, lecture of 10 December 1928) naturalizes such a state – 'we are all catatonics' he wittingly observes, given that we spend several stretches of our time without either perceiving or acting. The only difference is that the clinically catatonic patient cannot interrupt his or her own catatonia at will, whereas the healthy subject has developed the skill to master its own catatonic states and can decide to reenter the game of reaction and perception. The 'complexity' of perception refers to the literal *folding* of reflexes one upon another. It is a *complexus* that, as we have said, enables the temporary suppression of elementary, molecular, partial reactive movements to the advantage of accumulation and transformation of the basic elements in view of the deployment of a proper action. Elaborating on Janet, it is perhaps possible to suggest that perception entails a passage through an enlarged domain of invisibility: actually, perception entails an *amplification* of the invisible, which covers the compass of all enveloped reflexes.

Observed through the lenses of Figure 11.1, action appears a special type of reaction, one which, through a mastered temporal *décalage* and a strategy of envelopment, acquires a certain *complexity*. In the moment of action,

the triggering element has already become invisible: the stimulus is left behind and a more complex intermediate element appears. It is what Janet calls sentiment or feeling; for his part, Portmann (1990) called it the 'mood of the animal'. This mood is revelatory of the temporal depth of life. In his previous course on memory, Janet (2006 [1928]: 8) had stated that the faculty of memory develops initially as a form of 'differed action':

What is memory at the beginning? It is a differed action. It is an action of which only the first part – the verbal part – is executed whereas the second part [the physical act] is to be executed later. We begin with a part of an action and we'll complete the second part later.

This means that, by contrast, reaction is *without memory*: it exists in a state of immediacy, it must be played out all at once. In this sense, action and reaction exist in a different temporal horizon, and the time of reaction is instantaneous or, at least, much more contracted than the time of action. That is why, for instance, Janet, interprets the phenomenon of double personalities as a trouble with memory and a consequent narrowing of the field of consciousness (*rétrécissement*). Similarly, the psychiatrist Eugene Minkowski (1968 [1933]) would later describe schizophrenia as a psychic condition where the 'fullness of life' – better, the *breath* of life – gets shrunk. As a result of psychic disease, the 'sphere of ease in which my life can unfold' (1968 [1933]: 403) is compromised, with the individual being flattened into the register of reactivity. Since existential distance is compromised, if not thoroughly abolished, for the schizophrenic subject people and events become cluttered, heaped together, no longer understandable. In this sense, the reactive individual is a relentless individual, one perpetually in a state of neural vibrancy. The social brain does not let him (her) sleep, or maybe, he never manages to fully wake up, but cannot stop going – which gives an approximate portrait of the phenomenon of somnambulism.

Reaction in interaction

On the basis of what has been said, it becomes possible to distinguish two circuits, namely, the continuist circuit 'stimulation → reaction' and the discontinuist circuit 'perception → action'. If reaction is *causally* produced by stimulation, perception is *finalistically* developed for action.⁸ But the field of reactivity can be further refined. In *Evolution*, Janet captures two crucial evolutionary transformations in the genealogical constitution of the reactive regime. The first transformation is from generalized to localized reaction, the second from primary to secondary reaction. It should be remarked that, far from proposing linear and univocal evolution, this model allows for constant returns to previous forms of reaction. In particular, it is when the individual is put under pressure or strain that 'lower', coarser forms of reaction will be resorted to. In phylogenesis, Janet (2005, lecture of 20 December

1928) explains, early reactions are of the panic type. A panic reaction is a convulsion, contraction, or spasm of all the organism. Janet has several clinical cases where we see people reacting for instance to a shocking news with a convulsion crisis. Generalized reaction forms the primitive stratum of reaction from which localized reactions have slowly emerged. A localized reaction is also a specialized one, one in which only a single part of the body is activated in response to the excitation. Localized reactions are more precise and may serve to mount larger reflex complexes. The specification of reaction, in other words, makes it possible to attain something which is more difficult to produce, namely organized movement.

Yet even the most primitive reaction is already the result of selection, and thus the result of something like a specialization, albeit a very broad and coarse one. In this sense, the important lesson that derives from classic ecological biologists such as von Uexküll and Goldstein is that reaction is constitutively selective – if not, we may even say, *elective*. The animal, argued von Uexküll (1926), only reacts to selected stimulations. Such stimulations are elective in that they represent to the animal 'remarked signals' or 'distinguishing marks' (*Merkmale*). Selectivity is thus no less than reactivity an intrinsic feature of the animal. Later, Canguilhem (2015 [1951: 187]) commented that 'reaction is always a function of an opening of meaning vis-à-vis given excitations, and a function of its orientation in relation to them'. In one organism, in other words, there exists a specific 'orientation' of reaction toward the range of possible 'meaningful' excitations. Perhaps, it is even possible to advance the hypothesis that it is only thanks to this preliminary selectivity that the refinement of reaction toward greater specificity and localization becomes possible.

The process of specification of reaction described by Janet can perhaps be encapsulated in the idea that reaction progresses and evolves toward the within. From this perspective the first transformation is inherently related to the second. For this second transformation – the one from primary to secondary reaction – highlights another crucial fact. Primary reactions are simple, first-order, they react to some external stimulations. But in higher animals a second-order type of reaction develops – a reaction which reacts to one's own reactions. At this point, reactions become reflexive. Now the reactive also becomes *adaptive*: the aim of secondary reactions is to maintain the organism in equilibrium, to prevent it from being destabilized by primary reactions. Janet (2005: 64) thus distinguishes 'two branches of human conduct, the first departing from primary reactions to external excitations, the second departing from secondary reactions that keep the body in balance'.

The notion of feedback may be said to derive from this idea of secondary reaction. However, secondary reactions are not just any type of feedback; as conceived by Janet, secondary reactions are only stabilizing ones – what cybernetics call 'negative feedback'. For his part, Janet speaks of the 'stubbornness' of the living being (2005: 258). The peculiarity of conducts

deriving from second-order reactions is that they are attached to not only action but also *feeling*. Secondary reactions are 'sentimental', and as such they give way to the elaboration of consciousness. One of the leading motifs in Janet's work is precisely the idea that consciousness is a 'late comer' in the human psyche, something that is added a fortiori to primary conduct. Not simply that, but consciousness remains a process that is discontinuous and selective: 'Consciousness is not made at all time, and not about everything' (2005: 94). It is as secondary reactions, or introverted reactions, that feelings form the 'inner life' of the individual (as seen above, Portmann would have later spoken of the 'mood' of the animal).

In the passage from a few large reactions to many small reactions, the individual becomes a faceted creature, capable of refining and specializing its conduct. Similarly, in the passage from a-sentimental to sentimental reaction, that is, reaction accompanied by feelings, the individual acquires a new dimension. Interestingly, feelings appear initially as grounded in bodily existence, but they flourish especially in the form of social feelings. For Janet, and contrary to much previous psychology, social feelings are 'very simple' and even include 'primitive' things such as love and hate (2005: 103) which are nonetheless fundamental to the life of the individual as a whole. A fortiori, it is indeed possible to document that the lack of social feelings is always the mark of deeply pathological states, such as depression, ataraxia, and dementia. Understood this way, feelings constitute the whole of the inner life of the individual. While, at first, they appear as an addition to the original reflex act, their presence transforms the whole coloration of the act itself: they accompany it so that it may become regulated, and eventually acquire meaning – something which the original conduct does not necessarily have.

In short, this is how reaction – to the extent that it is more specific than general, and more thick than flat – matters to interaction. Now, it is possible to attempt some elaboration of these ideas. Actually, I think that Janet's theses can be used to understand the reactive regime even beyond a narrowly psychological perspective, that is, from the perspective of a theory of society. In fact, the emotional space also corresponds to an eccentric position where the individual is brought 'out of itself', and not only metaphorically. In other words, the space where reactions *deepen* spiraling into further degrees of self-referentiality is not necessarily to be imagined as depth psychology depicted it. Instead, here we might need to combine the insights of the theorists of depths with the theorists of surfaces to recognize that the deepening dynamic of secondary reactivity is *also* the space of interaction itself. In other words, the proposed way out of the quandary of surfaces and depths is the idea that depth is not only a psychological phenomenon, it is not a private thing invisibly located somewhere *in interiore homine*; rather, no less than surface, depth is itself part of the social intercourse.

The hypothesis advanced here is that, insofar as the reactive regime is concerned, society can in a way be said to constitute a special force that

pulls the individual up from the depths of biology, anatomy, physiology, and psychology, and projects it onto a special surface of heterogeneity and encounter. Such is the surface of *meaning* as it is interactively – or interreactively – constituted. Inter(r)action – but let's say interaction for simplicity – is a discontinuous process not completely unlike consciousness, or eye movements, which – as, respectively, psychology and physiology recognize – occur in discontinuous moments: respectively, 'conscientisation' and saccades.⁹ This amounts to saying that interaction is akin to a *small gap* or even a *glitch*, and that the reactive *exists* in this gap. Figure 11.2 provides a sketchy summary of this situation:

The picture can be explained as describing a continuous surface of visibility where superficial SR reactions occur. The very occurrence of reactions opens up gaps and glitches which introduce discontinuities in the medium. The deepening possibility offered by self-reflexive secondary reactions is exploited in depth by the creation of feelings. The medium in which the represented space should be thought might be called 'the visible'. In other words, the picture does not describe a psychological space, nor for that matter any external purely physical space. Instead, the location where the picture can be imagined is the *limit* or threshold between the psychological, the sociological, and the physical. We are located, if ever, in the Simondonian domain of the transindividual – we are, in other words, looking at the phenomenon from the perspective of the social ensembles or social multiplicities involved.

As we have observed above, the reactive individual presents itself as a 'superficial' individual whereas the active individual always wants to be taken for a 'deep' individual. But, society – that is, social life – pulls individuals up from the depths of biology, physiology, and psychology and projects them onto a peculiar surface of encounter: for only along this surface can meaning occur. Depth, in this sense, is nothing else but the 'passage at the limit' in the move from surface to surface.¹⁰

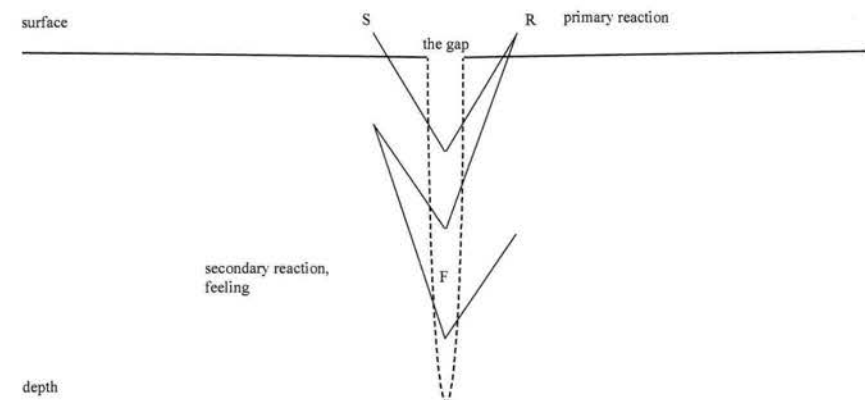


Figure 11.2 The space of reaction in interaction.

Conclusion: on reaction, affection, and diffusion

What the purely reactive individual does is devolve immediately – or, as soon as possible – the burden of social interaction. As we have noted above, for instance, presenting oneself as ‘merely reactive’ to someone else’s deeds is a key defensive strategy to disburden oneself – at least partially – from moral, political, and legal responsibility. This is also what we do, more mundanely, in our new media life whenever we ‘just’ react by liking, forwarding, retweeting a received content. For their part, new media platforms have perfectly understood that the measure of the importance of a post or entry is not its actual content, but the reaction it has elicited in the network – which is many cases an affective reaction. Similarly, as studied by anthropology, for a ‘person of honor’ everything that matters (that is everything that can touch him/her, everything that can prove to ‘affect’ or even ‘sting’) must be instantly played out on the visible surface – hence, the obsession for ‘saving the face’ in public, at all cost and at each instant (in other words, honor could not survive if reaction was absent).¹¹ Of course, however, since it is impossible to discharge all the burdens of social interaction, what individuals mostly do is negotiate their share. Indeed, to stay in the example, many are persons of honor *part-time*. But apart from this example, and well beyond it, what is clear is that the reactive regime tends to produce its own complications, its own envelopment, its special convolutions.

So, only apparently does reactive existence stand at the polar opposite of what Sloterdijk (2013: 110), after Nietzsche, has called ‘General Ascetology’ – that is, a form of existence whereby humans are taken in a constant vertical tension toward self-transcendence. In fact, the ‘exaggeration procedures’ described by Sloterdijk (2013: 209) seem to characterize not only explicit and conscious self-improvement practices, but also the reactive regime of social existence. Not only action, but reaction too faces an issue of *measure*: it contemplates qualitatively distinct triggering and intensifying points. What the previous analysis has led to conclude is that the reactive regime is never thoroughly flat, but rather consists in specific arrangements of transindividual surfaces and depths.

This may have some implications for the study of propagative dynamics. The reactive regime is located *in limine* of the diffusive picture of the social, as drawn for instance by Tarde (1890). For Tarde, the social thing wants to spread, and it is by devices such as teaching (imitation of beliefs) and command (imitation of desires) that it succeeds in doing so. As observed at the outset, not only imitation, but also contagion and suggestion point to diffusiveness as something essential in the social equation. Imitation, contagion and suggestion place individuals within chains and flows of forces and forms. But, as we have also seen, diffusion and affection cannot be thought of in separation from each other. Each social propagation, more than simply joining together the parts involved, actually brings them away. The visible *glitches*. The space of interaction – of interreaction – lies at the intersection between surfaces and depths.

Notes

- 1 In this sense, as Starobinski himself recalls, the cybernetic notion of *feedback* clearly stems from the notion of reaction. We return to this below.
- 2 Similarly, for instance, the late Nietzsche (1888: ‘What the Germans lack’, §6, original emphasis) castigated the Germans for being (or having become) a *reactive* people, that is – for him – a people quintessentially lacking *spirituality*:
That is the *first* preliminary schooling for spirituality: not to react at once to a stimulus, but to gain control of all the inhibiting, excluding instincts [...] All unspirituality, all vulgar commonness, depends on the inability to resist a stimulus: one *must* react, one follows every impulse.
- 3 See the extended discussion by Sebastian Vehlken’s chapter in this book.
- 4 ‘As soon as we compare the structure of the spinal cord with that of the brain, we are bound to infer that there is merely a difference of complication, and not a difference in kind, between the functions of the brain and the reflex activity of the medullary system’ (Bergson, 1939: 19).
- 5 It should be noted, however, that this course is not a stand-alone; instead, it is organically integrated with the previous and subsequent courses by Janet. For instance, many ideas developed in it represent a continuation of the 1928 course *The evolution of memory and the notion of time*, many of these are, in turn, expanded in *De l’angoisse à l’extase* (2009 [1928]).
- 6 The study of psychic automatisms is certainly the most renowned part of Janet’s work, but his famous 1889 book on the ‘lower forms of human activity’ is far better than exhausting Janet’s rounded theory of personality or, as we may perhaps better say, personhood. Personhood thus inherently relates to the question ‘What is an individual?’. In his philosophy of individuation, Simondon (2005) argues that psychic individuation descends from a specific *slowing down* of biological individuation. Simondon thus distinguishes between individuation and individualization. The latter he interprets as the ongoing individuation living forms can subject themselves to. If individualization is a process, individuality or personality is one of its achievements. As we shall see shortly, the notion of ‘delay’ plays an important role in Janet’s theorization, too.
- 7 A similar thesis can also be found in the anthropologist Giuseppe Sergi, who had spoken of the ‘stratification of character’ (Sergi, 1882). The developmental perspective is later summarized by Laborit (1971) in terms of the stratification and superposition of three cerebral systems in humans: the hypothalamic-reptilian (automated reflexes), the limbic (affection and memory), and the frontal-orbital or neocortical (imagination and rationality). The reptilian brain is an essentially reactive brain, one that works with a stimulation-reaction circuit.
- 8 This idea is discussed particularly by Bergson in *Matter and Memory*: ‘As a whole, perception finds its real reason to exist in the body’s tendency to move’ (Bergson, 1939: 44).
- 9 A saccade is the rapid eye movement between two subsequent fixation points. While vision may be seamless for the viewer, eyes are in fact constantly engaged in discrete jumps. I have reconstructed this phenomenon in Brighenti (2010: 14–17).
- 10 What is really difficult to image, and yet needs to be imagined, is that the movement is discontinuous while the surface is continuous. Further elaboration will be called to this point.
- 11 A poignant example comes for instance from the study of honor contests that degenerate in violence and homicide, usually in bar brawls and similar contexts. In research on homicides resulting from such situations, Polk (1999) has reconstructed events that are usually reported in the news as instances of ‘senseless

violence'. In fact, these are public situations that are quite structured and where even sudden escalation needs to be constructed move by move by the actors themselves. As Polk (1994: 14) notes, for violence to occur, it is necessary that 'the person challenged [...] interpret the behavior as a provocation that cannot be ignored'. Of course, one could still argue that reactivity is very much linked to stupidity; nonetheless, one should not underestimate how reactivity proves capable to span the most superficial and the deepest strata in the individual.

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