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Against Empathy: Critical Theory and the Social Brain

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to mount two distinct challenges to the currently fashionable research and discourse on empathy. First, the notion of empathetic perspective-shifting – a conceptually demanding, high-level construal of empathy that arguably captures the core meaning of the term – is criticized from the standpoint of a philosophy of normatively accountable agency. Empathy in this demanding sense fails to achieve a true understanding of the other and instead imposes the empathizers self-constitutive agency upon the person empathized with. Attempts to 'simulate' human agency, or attempts to emulate its cognitive or emotional basis, inevitably distort their target phenomena in profound ways. Second, I question dominant trends within currently prevailing empathy research from the perspective of a critical theory of the human sciences. The current vogue of empathy research and popular manifestos on the topic are troubling symptoms of a problematic discursive formation that increasingly gains currency. I argue that the *de facto* powerlessness of the individual in today's network capitalism is naturalized through a model of 'visceral sociality' that prizes affective attachment and harmonious connectedness, providing a nature-backed narrative of conformist, uncritical, domesticated affectivity. The discursive regime supported by research on the social brain sings a heroes song for the docile, the disempowered, the politically dismantled. A change of tune is urgently needed.

1. Introduction

Jeremy Rifkin has offered many a diagnosis and many a cure for the problems of our times. Globalization, structural changes in wage labor, the biotech revolution, Europe as a new global power, the new capitalist regime of 'access', hydrogen as the solution to global warming – you name it. Salvation hasn't exactly been in short supply as far as Rifkin is concerned. Recently, Rifkin has added empathy to the list of world-saving memes – and given the world a massive book on the topic. This is noteworthy. When Rifkin's army of research assistants is swarming archives and libraries to collect material on a topic, you can be sure that something grand is going on.[1] Rifkin's recent joining the empathy party is telling of a global trend: Empathy is *en vogue* – the hottest stone not yet fully turned in the universe of humanism. The core storyline is one that is heard all too often these days: Human nature is in the process of taking on a fundamentally new shape – thanks mostly to the brain sciences, developmental psychology, primatology and other bio-psychological sciences, a new core human nature rife with emotion, attachment, communication – but most of all: empathy – is currently being revealed. And surely, this is GREAT NEWS, because empathy, together with all those other pro-social traits now suddenly in the scientific spotlight, is such an immensely beneficial thing. How fortunate indeed that humanity, just in the midst of another gigantic global crisis, and while on the verge of destroying for good the ecosystem of this earth, stumbled on a so far undiscovered profound *positive characteristic* of itself. Here is Rifkin's sales pitch to open his manifesto:

> A radical new view of human nature is emerging in the biological and cognitive sciences (…). Recent discoveries in brain science and child development are forcing us to rethink the long-held belief that human beings are, by nature, aggressive, materialistic, utilitarian, and self-interested. The dawning realization that we are a fundamentally empathic species has profound and far-reaching consequences for society. (Rifkin 2009, p. 1)

You can almost feel it: the sigh of relief in readers that were just about ready to give up on mankind. But how does Rifkin explain of the puzzling fact that such a profound, deep, all-encompassing and immensely consequential feature of human nature could be so utterly overlooked for such a long time? How come that such a thorough misconstrual could rule the ages? This is how:

> Because the development of selfhood is so completely intertwined with the development of empathic consciousness, the very term "empathy" didn't become part of the human vocabulary until 1909 – (…). In other words, it wasn't until human beings were developed enough in human selfhood that they could begin thinking about the nature of their innermost feelings and thoughts in relation to other people's innermost feelings and thoughts, that they were able to recognize the existence of empathy, find the appropriate metaphors to discuss it, and probe the deep recesses of its multiple meanings. (Rifkin 2009, p. 11)

The sheer absurdity of this makes one gasp in exasperation. Rifkin here tells us that mankind needed to grow up first, to develop mature selfhood in order to finally wake up to what is now revealed as one of its most fundamental characteristics. Mankind finally discovered empathy – just in the very moment it embarked into a century of mass murder, genocide, exploitation of nature and fellow man that is without example in history. How fortunate for our species that it finally came to know itself in 1909 thanks to Edward Titchener.[2] This was the moment when, according to Rifkin, empathy entered the conversation of the learned. But it took another 100 unfortunate years of violence, ruthless exploitation and greedy individualism before empathy finally became fully recognized and understood in its outstanding importance. Only now have researchers found out how basic, how deep, how all-encompassing empathy is as a characteristic of humankind. And so it is only now that social theorists can begin to draw out the consequences this will have for the future of our civilization.

Rifkin is of course far from alone. "Greed is out, empathy is in," is the programmatic opening line of Frans de Waal's much noticed *The Age of Empathy* (2009). Like Rifkin, de Waal, an acclaimed Dutch primatologist, declares the beginning of a new era. Not fearful of clichés, de Waal sees the first election of Barack Obama in 2008 as the signature moment in the rise of empathy: roughly from then on, the sights were finally set on ending for good the greedy individualism left over from the Reagan/Thatcher days and the economic madness that culminated in the current global financial crisis.[3] At the heart of these good news is a message from biology. Our society's new benevolent, cooperative, empathetic style is not just a superficial idea thought out by armchair humanists – rather, it is robustly backed by our biological nature.

I have some objections to this by now sadly familiar story. This paper is a broad-stroke philosophical critique of key parts of the empathy discussion, empathy research and more broadly the empathy and social cognition/social brain discourse of recent years. I will bring together two distinct strands of discussion whose combination, I am confident, will be mutually illuminating. After setting the stage with an overview of issues concerning the definition of basic forms of empathy and of some key research approaches, I will set out to present a philosophical line of critique that concerns high-level cognitive empathy or what is sometimes called "empathic perspective-shifting". I will undertake to show, by taking up and developing arguments initially brought forth by Richard Moran and Peter Goldie, that this demanding mental operation fails to get at what it is supposed to reach: at another person's experiential reality, at her perspective on the world. Instead, the empathizer will ever only project and impose her own mental life, most notably her own agency, onto the other. At the heart of the matter lies a profound misconstrual of the structure of self-conscious agency. In other words: a flawed philosophy of mind leads to a wrong account of empathy.

After this theoretical critique, I add a second and rather different critical perspective by looking at the broader setting of current empathy research. I will develop the outlines of a critical theory of empathy research. What are the supporting and enabling factors that have set the stage for the current empathy boom? Why now? What template for subjectivity and selfhood is rising to prominence – and what specific sites, agencies, constituencies are pushing for this new type of empathic individual? How come that human biology is no longer equated with a constant struggle for survival or inclusive fitness, why are views of human nature now all of a sudden so much less bleak – as we hear almost nothing anymore of individualist striving and maximizing and much more about emotion, cooperation, communication, social intelligence, empathy, and interpersonal resonance? How could the rise to prominence of the 'social brain'—the biological signature of a whole new conception of human nature—become so steep indeed?

2. Setting the stage: What is empathy?

2.1. Low-level vs. high-level empathy

It is striking how many different conceptual and theoretical approaches to empathy are found in the literature.[4] A rough ordering can be imposed on the material by distinguishing between *lower-level* theories that are usually quite inclusive as to what they count as empathy, and *higher-level* theories that place much stricter—usually cognitive—demands on candidate processes.

Frans de Waal is an outspoken advocate of a very inclusive approach to empathy that starts out with low-level mechanisms. In his 'Russian doll model' of empathy—so called because of the nested structure that has evolutionary older mechanisms retained in more sophisticated newer ones—the range of empathic processes goes from quite basic ones of

state matching such as emotional contagion, affect attunement, and bodily resonance to processes such as sympathetic concern all the way up to full blown cognitively mediated perspective-taking (cf. de Waal 2009, p. 208/9). Strategy-wise, de Waal follows in the footsteps of Charles Darwin (1981 [1871]). In marked contrast to his coarse-grained popularizer Thomas Huxley who advocated a grim view of human nature, Darwin was a firm believer in deeply rooted moral instincts in humans, developing out of capacities to care for those in one's group and cooperate throughout the higher ranks of the animal kingdom. In about the same manner, a key line of de Waal's work is to search for altruistic, cooperative, and reconciliatory behavior in primates. The assumption is that these are then nested within – and still functionally contributing to – evolutionary younger, cognitively sophisticated mechanisms. While the model has some appeal in its reckoning with a structural continuum of a broad range of other-related traits, its enormous inclusivity does little to alleviate the major confusion about what is actually meant by 'empathy' in the mass of current literature. If traits as distinct as basic affective state matching and as sophisticated as cognitive perspective-taking are lumped together under the same umbrella, there is very little specificity in what counts as empathy—items collected under the term's scope would range from the most automatic to the most deliberate of mental processes. It is hardly possible, on these grounds, to arrive at informative claims about issues as intricate as, for instance, the roots of morality.

2.2. Emapthy as perspective-shifting

A much-needed precisification of the prevailing understanding of empathy is courtesy of some conceptual groundwork by philosophers Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie. Coplan in particular presents a convincing case for why we should—pace de Waal—distinguish higher-level, conceptually demanding cases of perspective shifting from a variety of lower-level phenomena. Without this clarification, we would be at a loss to understand and assess the

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various empirical findings on issues such as mirror neurons, shared representations, emotional contagion, mental simulation, and so on. Terminological ambiguity and conflation of quite distinct types of process have hampered the prospects for assessing the progress in empathy research (cf. Coplan 2011, p. 6). Coplan then specifies her own conceptualization of empathy as follows:

> [E]mpathy is a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation. To say that empathy is 'complex' is to say that it is simultaneously a cognitive and affective process. To say that empathy is 'imaginative' is to say that it involves the representation of a target's states that are activated by, but not directly accessible through, the observer's perception. And to say that empathy is a 'simulation' is to say that the observer replicates or reconstructs the target's experiences. (Coplan 2011, p. 6/7)

Thus, Coplan's proposal singles out three component processes that jointly make up fully-fledged empathy: affective matching, other-oriented perspective taking, and self-/other-differentiation. As we will see below, all these components pose severe difficulties. What is crucial at this point is that there are good reasons for reserving the term "empathy" for exactly this kind of complex, demanding process. Not doing so would threaten to blur our reasonable commonsense understanding of empathy as not just any affectionate process directed at or involving the other's state of mind, but as a precise way of 'feeling-into' another's perspective and thus coming to know the other's predicament from the inside, without losing one's grip on the distinction between ourselves and the other. As Coplan persuasively shows, even a process as demanding as *self-oriented* perspective taking—imaging *oneself* in another person's shoes—wouldn't do, because of the usually profound, deep-seated differences between individuals. What *oneself* would feel in a given situation is for the most part not a very good measuring stick of what another person would feel—outside of a limited range of trivial cases. The problem is made more severe by the default tendency to assume greater

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similarities between people than there in fact are—egocentric bias is a pervasive psychological trait in humans. Accordingly, Coplan concludes:

> To summarize, personal distress, false consensus effects, and general misunderstandings of the other are all associated with self-oriented perspective-taking. When we imagine ourselves in another person's situation, it frequently results in inaccurate predictions and failed simulations of the other's thoughts, feelings, and desires. It also makes us more likely to become emotionally over-aroused and, consequently, focused solely on our own experiences. (Coplan 2011, p. 14).

The only viable alternative conceptualization is other-oriented perspective-shifting. Peter Goldie christens it 'empathetic perspective-shifting' and specifies it as follows: "Consciously and intentionally shifting your perspective in order to imagine *being* the other person, thereby sharing in his or her thoughts, feelings, decisions and other aspects of their psychology." (Goldie 2011, p. 303). Accessing another's mind *from the inside*—and thus only producing the same mental states in oneself as one assumes the other person to have, but shifting imaginatively into the other's predicament while maintaining a clear-cut self/other differentiation.[5] Only then, or so the expectation goes, might one succeed to feel what the other feels not from one's own perspective but from the other's. Only then will one 'get at' what one wants to get at in one's earnest attempts at understanding another person. But now a crucial question arises: Is this quite demanding mental maneuver really possible?

3. Why empathy fails: The usurpation of agency

How might one possibly do this: *imagining being the other*—without inevitably projecting and thus imposing what is in fact our own 'being' onto the other person? Can we really *successfully, genuinely* imagine being another person?

I am pessimistic here, and with this I side entirely with Peter Goldie (2011): Outside of very primitive cases, empathetic perspective-shifting simply fails. It is just not possible to do it in the way needed to realize the demanding construal of empathy. But, and that is the good news, it is also not required for civilized interpersonal conduct. The fact that empathetic perspective shifting doesn't work is not tragic. Rather, its failure is instructive, because in analyzing it we learn something about what it means to be a full-blooded agent, about what it means to possess a practical point of view. Understanding this failure provides us with a more adequate understanding of the mind and of personhood, and thus is in the end also informative for a better way to conceive of beneficial and praiseworthy ways of interpersonal interaction that actually *do* work. As I hope to make plausible below, an adequate understanding of agency is the linchpin around which most core controversies in current philosophy of mind revolve. It is crucial to make this widespread combination of an underestimation and a misconstrual of agency explicit and point out its problematic consequences.

3.1. Outside the base case

This what Goldie calls the 'base case'—a standard shape of an interaction scenario that is assumed as a template for the explication of empathetic perspective shifting: a person A attempts to empathize with another person B in a situation where there are

(i)   no relevant differences in the psychological dispositions of A and of B

(ii)   no relevant nonrational influences on B's psychological make-up or decision-making
        process;

(iii)   no significant confusions in B's psychological make-up; and

(iv)   no psychological conflicts (where B has to make a choice where it is not clear to B

which alternative is to be preferred). (see Goldie 2011, p. 308)

The point is, for this kind of case, empathic perspective shifting might indeed be supposed to

work—but that's just because about everything relevant and realistic has been omitted here.

Base case scenarios are completely uninteresting when it comes to personal affairs. These are

cases so simple and obvious that even largely uninformed and insensitive persons could arrive

at correct predictions as to what is on B's mind and what B is going to do next. Crucially, in

base case scenarios, predictions can be made regardless of what person it is whose mental

states are to be predicted. (Goldie 2011, p. 309)

The problem is obviously that when it really matters to understand another, cases are

just not like this. Usually, conditions (i) to (iv) are not all fulfilled; in fact, for the most part,

all four of them are violated in most meaningful real-life encounters. Attempts to empathize

have to deal with relevant differences in disposition, ability and character; the prospective

empathizer will have to countenance nonrational influences on the target person's thinking

and deciding; and likewise, we will regularly have to assume a certain level of confusion (or

of uncertainty and indeterminacy) in any given person about her own attitudes and

experiences. Not least, quite often there will be conflicts calling for nontrivial resolution, such

as when important, nonobvious choices have to be made. I will quickly review Goldie's case

by case treatment for the four points that distinguish most real life scenarios from the base

case.

First, consider the way a person's characteristics, such as being friendly, shy, or timid,

partly shape what is on her mind at a given point while not figuring among the conscious

contents of her mental states. Obviously, character traits have a massive impact on what a

person is thinking and feeling at a given point in time—but this impact is for the most part

tacit and in the background of awareness, it is not something that a person is consciously

focused on, let alone something she freely deploys. As Ryle aptly said: "The vain man never feels vain" (Ryle 2000 [1949], p. 87). So given the not unlikely case that person A possesses markedly different character traits than person B, how will she be able to provide for this difference in her simulation attempt? Here is Goldie's description of the predicament:

> A cannot, as part of a consciously willed project, keep B's characterization in the non-conscious background (…). A will be obliged, in trying to shift to B's perspective, to treat B's characterization through the theoretical or empirical stance, as one typically does when considering the role of character in explaining or predicting other people's decisions, actions. (Goldie 2011, p. 309)

Thus, we arrive at the first sense in which the agency of person B is likely to be 'usurped' by the empathizer: Background dispositions, traits and abilities of B, as far as they are known, have to be objectified and introduced consciously and deliberately into the process of imaginative perspective shifting. Short of some kind of professional method acting, this will inevitably ruin the attempt to imagine *being* the other person, as person A will have to artificially bring to bear alien character traits in order to frame person B's states of mind in the right way.

A similar problem is raised by the second usual difference between individuals, viz. the routine amount confusion and irrationality that besets most natural-born human minds. For instance, how to mentally reproduce another person's *unconscious* mood-related irrationality? (cf. Goldie 2011, p. 313) Again, the most likely and most practicable option is for A to *artificially objectify* the irrationality-inducing state of feeling. For example, A could try to introduce B's anxious and timid background feelings into her simulation attempt by actively bringing herself in a similarly anxious state of mind—however, if successful, this would likely yield a foreground feeling of fear but not a pervasive background anxiety, such as an existential feeling of fearfulness (Ratcliffe 2008).[6] Again, nothing short of outright

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method acting would let the empathizer reach a mental state of the kind that likely shapes B's experiential background.

There is a common pattern to all these problems, and it comes out in clearer focus when we consider points (iii) and (iv) on Goldie's list. Mental states are not like 'inner objects' that appear on some kind of inner stage. The issues so far discussed have shown first that the background frame of mind—character traits and background moods pre-consciously affecting a person's mental life—cannot be objectified and introduced *alongside* conscious foreground mental states. A person's conscious perspective has a background/foreground or projection/baseline structure that is virtually impossible to emulate by another. What the subsequent points will show is that objectification never works for mental states, regardless of foreground or background, fully conscious or hidden in the background of awareness. Mental processes are notoriously not the object of an inner perception—rather, they are that *through which* a person directs herself to the world, dynamically, actively, from her own often unique perspective. The basic situation is thus one of active, prospective engagement with the world: a future-directed *positioning* towards what goes on. Concretely, this means that a mental agent for the most part has an active say in determining her own subsequent mental processes. As beings capable of self-interpretation (Taylor 1985), we have a say about what it is that we think, feel, or want. This becomes especially clear in the case of confusion, as Goldie explains:

> The ability to reflect on our confusion, and decide what we think or feel, has at its heart the full-blooded notion of agency in relation to our own minds. Thoughts are thought, feelings felt, decisions and choices made, *by particular agents*, and the identity of the agent in this full-blooded sense can make a difference to what is thought, felt, decided on, or chosen. It is not as though all thoughts, feelings, decisions, and choices can be 'processed' by *any* agent, impersonally… (Goldie 2011, p. 315)

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Thus, to be a conscious and self-conscious agent—in other words, a person—is not being some sort of container filled with a peculiar sort of entities or states, viz. mental states, as some class of determinate objects. Being an agent means having a say in specifying, in ultimately deciding and *committing* to what one will have on one's mind. Imagine a complicated social situation in which you might not initially know what you are feeling—is this necessarily a case of having to introspect more carefully in order to find out what that 'true feeling' is that you're having? Or is this more often rather a practical question where it is partly up to you to determine what your feeling is, what is appropriate, what the situation demands? As Charles Taylor has repeatedly shown: Even our confusions and self-misunderstandings enter into our mental states, and come to shape their content and direction (Taylor 1985).

The same point can made for the case of conflict (Goldie's fourth point), where a person is pulled in different directions in a situation of choice, and thus called upon to decide between competing options. Surely, those decisions have to be radically first-personal in that one cannot just neutrally ponder one's options, calculate their pros and cons, look their respective value up in a table, as it were—and then just decide according to the result of that calculation. Instead, one inevitably will have to *bestow*, first-personally, weights upon one's options. The agent will have to adopt a stance, undertake a commitment. While rational, and thus partly the outcome of deliberation, personal choice has to concretize value in one's own given case. Consider what Paul Ricœur writes on the matter:

> It is of the essence of value not to appear except as a possible motive of decision. I testify to a value only as its champion. (…) I see only those values which I am willing to serve. (Ricœur 1966 [1950], p. 75)

This element of commitment—genuine choice in terms of first-personal involvement—is what escapes attempts of simulating another's mental states: "in empathetic perspective-

shifting, where A thinks B's thoughts, and then in imagination decides what is the right thing

for B to think or to do, A *usurps* B's agency, replacing it with her own" (Goldie 2011, p.

315). It is agency that is needed in making a choice—and it is agency in the rich sense of

bringing oneself to bear on a given matter. And this agency, in a situation of empathetic

perspective shifting, can only ever be the agency of the empathizer, not the agency of the

person empathized with.

So this is what Goldie means by the 'full-blooded notion' of agency. A full-blooded

agent is not separate from her mental states as if they were inner objects swimming in some

kind of impersonal mental stream. Instead, the agent actively brings about what she has on her

mind, at least to a significant extent. An agent is the very 'instance' capable and called-upon

to *commit*, to adopt stances towards the world and be ready and willing to live up to them

(beliefs, decisions, attitudes)—the mental cannot be understood in abstraction from this

domain of commitment. The common idea of first person authority about one's mental states

is not to be understood as an epistemically privileged position, as a matter of just 'knowing'

one's own, as it were, pre-existing mind, but it is crucially a matter of first-person *authorship*

with regard to our attitudes and stances (Moran 2001). How can this be supposed to be

simulated by someone else without this other person inevitably *imposing* her own

interpretations, decisions, commitments, or would-be commitments? The core of what it

means to be a genuine agent—the instance that, however confused and instable, has a say in

determining what is thought or felt—cannot be empathetically simulated without an alien

imposition, without an artificial act of objectifying or imposing the empathizer's own agency.

Trying this in earnest would be a move that comes close to patronizing the other because one

inevitable will take what is in fact *one's own* agency (or would-be agency) for the agency in

which the other person's mental states are anchored. As agents, we are in an important sense

"irreplaceable" or "nonsubstitutable": fully-fledged agency is in each case essentially

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someone's, there is an ineliminable moment of authentic ownership, or *Jemeinigkeit*, to use Heidegger's term (Heidegger 1927, p. 41).

We see here that this line of thought espoused by Goldie reaches back, via Richard Moran's insightful account of self-knowledge (Moran 2001), at least to the existentialist tradition, Sartre and Heidegger. Being an agent means indeed this, *being it yourself*, nobody can take over your agency, and decide and live in your stead.

Thus, Goldie's approach has a much wider scope than just the debate surrounding empathy and interpersonal relatedness more generally. His critique of accessing *other* minds through empathy mirrors in key respects a critique of a standard construal of accessing one's *own* mind through introspection: Our mental states are not like 'inner objects' that we can either perceive accurately or misperceive—as has been claimed by some recent psychological defenders of introspection (Hurlburt 2009, see also Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel 2007). As self-interpreting, self-constituting agents, we have a notable, if obviously limited, first-personal *authority* in deliberating about and determining *what it is* that we think, feel, or want. Thereby, we contribute to the *making of* our mental states by deliberating on our situation and by adopting and sustaining attitudes towards what is going on. Attentively making up one's mind and committing to an attitude—a belief, say—are *agentive* capacities, active exercises of abilities. These have limitations, they often have to be exercised against resistances—but ultimately, the key point is that the mental is in the register of what we do—instead of something that merely wells-up, passively, within us. This basic agentive core of a person's perspective on the world needs to be protected against attempts to ignore it or explain it away.

Returning to mind-reading or mental simulation, it is clear that these considerations will not doom *any sort* of interpersonal understanding, let alone basic processes of attunement and resonance, but what should now be evident is that the right stance towards another person is not one of trying to simulate, within one's own mind, the mental states of the other.

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3.2. Alternatives: Interaction and Recognition

Recent phenomenological work on what has become known as *interaction theory* has the potential to make some progress in this regard, putting forth a possible alternative to empathetic perspective-shifting.[7] It is no accident that interaction theory thoroughly breaks with simulation accounts of empathy. This approach, as developed by authors such as Shaun Gallagher, Joel Krueger, Thomas Fuchs, Matthew Ratcliffe and others, does not conceive of the understanding of another's mind as a case of one person simulating or mirroring an other's mentality, but instead focuses on mutual interactive engagement and on an emphatic co-presence or 'being-with' one another. Instead of the inquisitive attempt of one 'mind' getting 'at' or even 'into' another, a kind of *joint* agency, and *joint* active world-orientation is established. With this, interaction theorists appreciate what has just been shown: that the only way to meaningfully engage with another person's mentality without imposition is by engaging with her on the level of agency—establishing *co-engagement*, as it were, for example by jointly enacting a project. "Participatory sense-making" has been one helpful concept developed for this purpose (de Jaegher & di Paolo 2007), another is the concept of a "we-space" (Krueger 2011)—a realm of co-presence, bodily enacted between interacting individuals. In these various forms of joint active engagement, the interactants might come to achieve a kind of coalescence that brings forth exactly the kind of 'union of minds' that advocates of empathy strive for—not by way of simulation but rather by first building up a joint perspective on the world that both may then adopt as their own. Thus, there is an active, constructive and forward-looking element here that establishes connection between individuals—instead of a miraculous bridge between two essentially closed-off inner realms.[8]

What this shows is that the quasi-inquisitive attempt to fully 'get at' another person's perspective on the world is superfluous. Nothing is lost when one substitutes it for a stance of

acknowledging, of *recognizing* the other, both in her (partial) agentive autonomy and in her exposedness as a vulnerable, needy being (Butler 2001). With this, we come to *let her be* in what ultimately remains an inevitable alterity. This might actually be what Descartes, of all people, had in mind when he spoke of *générosité*—the generous stance of transcending one's own partial, enclosed perspective in order to open oneself up and let oneself be 'conditioned' by the other (see Ricœur 1966 [1950], p. 62). To come full circle with this as a model for an open, responsible togetherness in mutual recognition, however, we would have to add Judith Butler's perspective on the subject's irredeemable relationality, epitomized in our exposure towards one another as vulnerable beings:

> What might it mean to make an ethic from the region of the unwilled? It might mean that one does not foreclose upon that primary exposure to the Other, that one does not try to transform the unwilled into the willed, but to take the very unbearability of exposure as the sign, the reminder, of a common vulnerability, a common physicality, a common risk. […] [Violence] delineates a physical vulnerability from which we cannot slip away, which we cannot finally resolve in the name of the subject, but which can provide a way to understand the way in which all of us are already not precisely bounded, not precisely separate, but in our skins, given over, in each other's hands, at each other's mercy. This is a situation we do not choose; it forms the horizon of choice, and it is that which grounds our responsibility. In this sense, we are not responsible for it, but it is that for which we are nevertheless responsible. (Butler 2001, 39)[9]

To be sure, this is a long way removed from the specialist debates about the mechanisms of high-level empathy, and I cannot at this point go into detail with the complex alternative narrative the outlines of which I here barely sketch. What should be clear, at the very least, is that there is no need to let a narrowly-focused 'social cognition' literature monopolize the difficult and important topic of interpersonal relatedness.

4. Toward a Critical Theory of the Social Brain

A critical theory approach to science is one that places the manifest content of a branch of scientific knowledge, including its applications, practices and discourses, into the wider ambient of its origins, enabling and structuring factors (historical, socio-cultural etc.), and, in addition, uses this contextual knowledge to project it onto possible futures—i.e. expected longer-term consequences and impacts of currently ongoing practice. The critical theory approach asks where a given swath of scientific activity is coming from and where it is heading toward, both understood broadly. This encompassing situating receives its normative guidance from founding ideals of the enlightenment, such as the striving towards emancipation, equality, freedom from coercion, or other elements of a thick conception of human flourishing. The critical theorist of science thus asks whether a branch of science and its material and discursive uptake is discernibly in the service of these ideals, or whether it is rather obscuring or hindering an emancipatory understanding of human affairs, or whether it even directly contributes to coercive political or institutional arrangements.[10]

Details and complications aside (and they are many: see Slaby & Choudhury 2012), what often rightly assumes pride of place in such contextualizing endeavors is the critical interrogating of nascent scientific understandings of what is 'natural', and the various uses made of such assumptions of naturalness. As not only history teaches, scientific inquiry into human reality comes with a strong tendency to mobilize, and subsequently anchor, specific values that are routinely attached to construals of nature or of naturalness. Ideas of what counts as natural—whether they refer to constructs of race or gender differences, to breakdown patterns characteristic of mental disorder or to the ideal course of human cognitive development—are in need of unpacking. Without reflection on their histories and formative assumptions underlying them, these constructs can appear as self-evident, universal and above history. Certain states and conditions are thus discursively placed outside the reach of human

agency, as something we simply have to put up with. The correct assumption that the natural sciences are central among our collective attempts at world disclosure is still routinely exaggerated into an absolute authority, decades of work in science studies notwithstanding. What is more, the sciences are not just seen as the high road to the "ultimate layout of realty" —as the authoritative source of *factual* knowledge—, but scientific results often come to be seen as a specifically of *normative* facticity (Hartmann 2012). What science reveals not only appears as empirically given, but as making normative claims and imposing demands upon us in everyday life: science shows, or so the assumption goes, how one is supposed to live healthily, how to work productively, learn optimally, relax adequately or organize one's relationships. In fact, whole ways of being, ways of conducting one's life are put forth as normatively adequate, often innocently packaged alongside the 'great advances' brought on by new tools, new meds, new recreation techniques. Work in the human sciences regularly recommends specific modes of conduct and ways of thinking about life and personhood more generally.

It is here where a critical theory approach finds its material. The task is to analyze the manifold ways in which those tacitly normative schemas come about, are spread and sustained. It is important to understand why a specific, time-bound credibility is attached to the value-imbued narratives that leave the sites of scientific fact production or that are mobilized with reference to putative scientific findings. The growing power especially of human neuroscience—together with the usual bunch of allied disciplines such as evolutionary psychology, behavioral genetics and some other med-, psy- or cognition related fields—as a quasi-hegemonic interpretive schema in human affairs makes it a target of special attention.[11]

4.1. Human Nature 2.0

Concerning the topic of empathy, what is most in need of analysis is the remarkably swift change in style, direction and normative tendency within both social brain research and science-inspired accounts of human nature in the past 30 or so years. A profound change of tune can be observed between the 1970s' biologist social reformers and today's new wave bio-humanists. The predominant type in the 1970ies was a hard-nosed reductionist and champion of a grim view of human nature (see, e.g., Wilson 1975), emulating their nineteenth-century forerunners (such as Herbert Spencer and Thomas Huxley).

Today, the focus has shifted towards a surprisingly rosy and optimistic picture—authors such as Frans de Waal point to a developmentally stable, evolutionary old, even 'hard-wired' benevolent sociality. The selfish gene has given way to the empathic social brain without much protest or struggle. How that? How does de Waal, for instance, arrive at his view that morality-enabling mechanisms are significantly more than a thin veneer thrown over a selfish and brutish core human nature?[12] With de Waal and like-minded researchers, biology is aspiring to become a great hope of humankind. Consider the following quotation from a New York Times article by Daniel Goleman, one of the leading popular advocates of the recent wave of social brain research:

> The fledgling field of social neuroscience is [now] figuring out the brain mechanics [of] the circuitry that underlies the urge to help others in distress. … Mirror neurons operate like a neural WiFi, activating in our own brains the same areas for emotions, movements and intentions as those of the person we are with. This allows us to feel the other person's distress or pain as our own [and we are] moved to help relieve it. Those who feel another's distress most strongly are most likely to help; those less moved can more easily ignore someone else's distress. (Goleman 2006)

Or take once again Jeremy Rifkin and his eagerness to draw grand-scale consequences for human social organization from the allegedly converging findings of the science of empathy:

Viewing economic history from an empathic lens, allows us to uncover rich new strands of the human narrative that lay previously hidden. The result is a new social tapestry - the Empathic Civilization - woven from a wide range of fields, including literature and the arts, theology, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, political science, psychology, and communications theory. (Rifkin 2009, p. 1/2)

To begin with, what immediately strikes one is how little factual grounding lies behind many of the strong judgments de Waal, Goleman, Rifkin and other authors in the empathy and natural morality business routinely make. These writers seem not only to count on the assumption that their readers share a deeply naturalist, wholeheartedly scientistic worldview, but also, importantly, that readers will lend default plausibility to the broad-stroke construal of a pro-social, benevolent human nature. Present some data on mirror neurons here, give some experimental results on the attachment-hormone oxytocin there—then throw in some feats of cooperation observed in primates and you have enough sticking points for a robust feel-good tale that does not even seem in need of much actual argument.

Anthropologist Allan Young has found a fitting gloss for the recent shift towards the social brain: According to him, *Human Nature 1.0* has given way to *Human Nature 2.0*. This transformation, as a child of our time, is played out predominantly in construals of the brain—the seat of human nature, as far as our dominant cerebro-centric world view has it (Vidal 2009). The emerging social brain with its emotional, communicative, and cooperative competencies, designed according to the superhuman wisdom of natural selection, displaces the selfish, mechanical, self-contained Cartesian 'ego' brain of former times. Mirror neurons function as a neural Wi-Fi that links us up to form various social networks. Sympathetic connectedness reigns the day. Young notes how thoroughly *Human Nature 2.0* is placed in a positive light—unwelcome phenomena not fitting the cozy tendency, although regularly revealed, are routinely ignored or explained away. One example is the surprisingly high

empathy scores in psychopaths that suggest the existence of what Young dubs "empathic cruelty". This is confirmed by data to the effect that experimental subjects often take pleasure in inflicting pain or loss on others that behaved unfairly in interaction (cf. Young 2012). Neither these results nor the various objections against the claim that empathy is an important pillar of human morality have managed to put much of a damper on the widespread empathy enthusiasm.[13]

Young himself is not making all that much of the obvious allusion contained in his talk of *Human Nature 2.0*—instead, he carefully charts the writings of key figures in the current research trend, analyzing for the most part the manifest scientific content of the shift in question. However, the reference to the internet and its evolution from an individual use tool towards interactive applications, user-generated content (web 2.0) and the general shift towards social media in the past ten years is revealing. As so often before in the history of the human sciences, we are again witnessing the co-production of scientific research trends, interpretive schemas, technical developments, changes in social organization and, not least, novel, technologically enabled and economically supported cultural practices. Placed in this light, it is much less puzzling to see how a conception of human nature that would have been radically counter-cultural (at best) just two decades ago—think of the Reagan/Thatcher years of rigorous market liberalism and self-interested individualism—has risen to prominence so swiftly. Placed in this light, the social brain seems to be of rather recent origin, barely predating smartphones and Facebook.

4.2. Disempowerd agency – domesticated affectivity

This brings us back to Rifkin. As a social theorist worth his salt, Rifkin puts a lot of effort into charting the historical process of the social constitution of consciousness—processes of

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mutual shaping and co-evolution of technologies, forms of social organization, cultural practices, the living conditions of the masses and predominant forms of selfhood, formations of thought and feeling. Large chunks of *The Age of Empathy* contain socio-historical considerations of this kind, covering a broad range of developments since ancient times. Thus, Rifkin is quite well aware of the family of processes that are constantly shaping and re-shaping the contours of human existence. What is utterly absent, however, is a reflexive application of this fundamental insight on the natural and human sciences themselves. How can we still assume an authoritative disclosure of an a-historical human nature when humanity itself is so obviously a product of historical developments? How can we fail to include a level of critical reflection upon the foundations and contexts of scientific knowledge production? There is thus more than a portion of bad faith in Rifkin's suggestion that science has now, *only now*, revealed a deep human nature that it so far had entirely missed.

I will single out two tendencies from this broader trend that lie hidden in plain sight—regularly obscured by the currently fashionable return to a kind of blind faith into the manifest contents of the proclamations of the human sciences.[14] The first tendency is a thorough dismantling of the potentials for genuine human agency amidst the dominant economic and cultural tendencies of our day; the second is the trend towards an increasingly domesticated positive affectivity which places a ban on all kinds of negative, oppositional, dissonant, nonconformist emotions and feelings.

In the manner of the broad-stroke historical pattern discernment that Rifkin works with, one might plausibly hold the following: The same global trend that—in Rifkin's speculative socio-historical tale—is responsible for creating a phase of "global peak empathy" (Rifkin 2009, p. 423), could with equal warrant be seen as a steadily increasing force that is disempowering human agency. Both genuine individual agency and also most relevant forms of collective action are increasingly channeled and framed in ways that pervert the

enlightenment idea of human self-determination. Human agents are increasingly frozen in their place, unable to effect significant change in line with their own modes of understanding and deliberate, self-determined goal-directedness. Today, talk of individual agency begins to have an air of cynicism about it. 'More is less' might be a fitting slogan here. The individual in Western liberal societies is offered a gigantic number of possible 'life choices', not to mention commoditized life-style options, but at the same time individuals have very little space to maneuver outside the ordinary.[15] And the ordinary, obviously, is the world of work in its current form, an ubiquitous fray of striving for a career, pursuing profit, advancing one's economic status—along with a range of consumerist life models that have come to set the parameters of human existence in the developed world. It is almost impossible, or at any rate it comes at a massive prize, when individuals elect to sidestep the logic of market and commodity capitalism and the rigorous framing of life choices that it engenders.

Concomitantly, there is increasingly less space for politically relevant agency. As most else, political 'activity' is largely left to professionals—agencies, expert circles, regulatory bodies, etc. Individuals might not be openly discouraged from actively participating in political activities, but there is a widespread sense that effective political decision-making is far removed from the level at which individual or grass-root group efforts might still have discernible effects.[16] Enter empathy—what a beautiful surrogate for the disempowered. The world may be a prison, but at least we are nice and understanding to one another. When someone tries to break out of it and gives in to an outburst of protest, aggression or directed anger—his fellows will be quick to comfort: *Calm down—we know what you are feeling.*

The de facto powerlessness of the individual—its increasingly rigid positioning on a grid of life choices and lifestyle options—in today's network capitalism is naturalized through a model of visceral sociality that prizes affective attachment and harmonious connectedness, providing a nature-backed narrative of a docile, flexible, consumerist subjectivity (see

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Brinkmann 2008). Selling this trend, as Rifkin and others do, as both a great advancement and as something robustly backed by biological human nature, comes close to an ideological masking of a coercive status quo.[17]

Here is the place to add the second of the two tendencies I announced above. We see here a pervasive regime of positive, conformist, domesticated affectivity. As (not only) Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) has persuasively shown, the 'smile or die' imperative is ubiquitous, placing an effective ban on the open expression of negative emotion. Instead of letting affectivity be a field of resonance for a wide range of human experiences, including those that reflect potentially problematic, pathological aspects of today's conditions of living, a strict policy is imposed towards a thin range of mind-numbing positive emotions and ways of 'positive thinking'. It is a mixture of optimism, cheerfulness, sympathetic politeness and composed self-possession which restricts and controls the range of affects on display in everyday life. Thereby, the potential for critique and resistance is drowned effectively already on the level of sentiment, interpersonal style and emotional conduct. A specific perniciousness lies in this tendency, as emotional dispositions, once sufficiently engrained, tend to become so profound that they freeze into a kind of second nature (see Goldie 2004). This means not only that they are rarely called into question, but that even our *capacity* to question them is severely limited, because our emotional outlook will inevitable also come to shape the very standards we employ in our normative self-assessments. Our emotions shape what seems natural to us. Because of this, it will be increasingly hard for individuals to even see and appreciate the potential value of alternatives to the dominant affective regime.[18]

Empathy, especially in its imprecisely defined one-size-fits-all 'feel good' variety, is a central part of this normative package, happily imposed by soft skill experts in human resources departments around the globe. No wonder that authors like Rifkin begin to see a

higher intelligence at work here, a truly global consciousness taking shape in recruiting seminars and job assessment centers:

> The new insights into human beings' empathic nature has even caught the attention of human resource management who are beginning to put as much emphasis on social intelligence as professional skills. […] Learning how to work together in a thoughtful and compassionate manner is becoming standard operating procedure in a complex, interdependent world (Rifkin 2009, p. 18).

Today, the spin-doctors in personnel departments and counselling companies of corporate capitalism have become the chief providers of ready-to-use narratives and normative templates for all areas of human existence—and surely empathy is one of their powerful watch words. We have long witnessed the rise of a new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007), the soft but unrelenting pressures of a globalised economy, the universal demand for adaptability, flexibility, emotional and social intelligence, creativity, self-motivation, and other 'new values' that facilitate the growing entanglement and co-articulation of work and life, that will further drive the near-complete absorption of existence into the corporate culture of the work world and the boundless consumerism that goes along with it.[19] Social and emotional intelligence, empathic benevolence—we cannot just take it all in as the *obvious* descriptions of who we are and who we should be. What is needed, at the very least, is a thorough questioning and informed contestation of these new descriptive regimes.

5. Conclusion

How to crack the unholy alliance between shallow, popularized human science and the trend-setting discourses and practices in the corporate universe and affirmative mainstream culture? What can scientists and scholars do in order to not blindly and unwittingly drive further and publicly promote the trends here outlined? The first step has to be the creation of an

awareness of the material and discursive constellation that I have hinted at here. Change has to begin with insight: with articulations of the entanglements between authoritative descriptions of human capacities and dominant forms of social organization in areas such as the workplace, the school, the clinic. The brain in particular cannot be considered just another object of a merely empirical, neutral and objective gaze. To be sure, naïve objectivism is false across the board, but there is a specific significance pertaining to all things neuro—especially in our time, a time in which the cerebral has become a hegemonic cultural template (Malabou 2012). It is of outstanding important to appreciate the political nature of accounts of brain functioning. The brain and its functioning principles will inevitably be at the center of models of how living systems, and, by extension, social systems do function—the brain is the command structure par excellence. Accordingly, I emphatically agree with Catherine Malabou about the brain's far-reaching politically significance: "any vision of the brain is necessarily political" (Malabou 2008, p. 52)—and thus: "It is not the identity of cerebral organization and socioeconomic organization that poses a problem, but rather the unconsciousness of this identity" (ibid.).

Can we end the unconsciousness of the identity, or rather: of the pervasive co-articulation of the neuronal and the social-economical? Sure we can. Philosophers in particular are called upon to engender a vigilant reflexivity in their dealings with the dominant scientific discourses. Time-bound constructs such as empathy have to be taken up in the wealth of their relations—including their historical formation, their utter absence in other cultural environments, and their conceptual as well as political contestations. We can stop taking the constructs and alleged 'insights' of the new human sciences at face value. In any case, we cannot settle for a complacent positivism that lets scholars jump uncritically on a current pop science hype, as when a modish discipline like neuroscience directs the cultural spotlights on a range of apparently timely phenomena, and the usual pundits come to call out

a revolutionary development in human affairs. Instead, as I hope to have begun doing here, we can employ the means of critique in order to shake the complacency among scholars and the public in their absorption and consumption of the scientific and cultural status quo.

I have sketched the beginnings of such a reflexive endeavor, highlighting a few major sign posts around which more encompassing critical treatments could focus. I did not make much of the connections between my first (philosophical) line of critique on a widespread misconstrual inhering to parts of the mainstream empathy debate and the second line of critique, an assessment of the potentially coercive and ideological tendencies in the 'social brain' industry and its discursive surround. But of course, there is an obvious link in what I have described as the attack on human agency: Openly or not, wittingly or not—we see a broad-scale dismantling of human agency on many levels. It is here where the two strands of my critique meet. On the one hand, we have contentious construals of the mind as a passive reflex engine and models of mental access as inner observation. On the other hand, we witness the scientific naturalizing of the social in terms of whatever pre-conscious, subcutaneous mechanisms are currently *en vogue*—be it mirror neurons, attachment hormones or the hidden physiological seats of contagious affect. My plea, very simply, has been to further our understanding of what goes on here and to insist on the indispensability and irreducibility of human agency.

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[1] Rifkin begins the acknowledgements section of his book by expressing his gratitude to his director of research, Lisa Friedberg, plus to no less than 23 research interns (Rifkin 2009, ix).

[2] Titchener was the first to employ the term 'empathy' in its current meaning, initially as a translation of the German word "Einfühlung" as used by Theodor Lipps (see Titchener 1909).

[3] That de Waal picks no one else than the "king of drones" himself as the iconic impersonation of the empathy trend is a chilling indication of what path we might be on (see *The Wall Street Journal*, online at http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323951904578288351143647568.html#. Accssed 6 February 2013).

[4] Good overviews and attempts at systematization are provided by Batson (2009), Coplan & Goldie (2011) and Stueber (2013).

[5] This is how Coplan justifies the additional condition of a clear self-other-differentiation: "Without clear self-other differentiation, we are almost certain to fail in our attempts to empathize. We either lose our sense of self and become enmeshed [with the other's experience] or, more often, we let our imaginative process become contaminated by our self-perspective and thus end up engaged in a simulation that fails to replicate the experience of the other. Self-other differentiation allows for the optimal level of distance (…). We are neither fused nor detached." (Coplan 2011, 17)

[6] The central idea behind Ratcliffe's (2008) proposal is that of a fundamental *felt relatedness* of self and world. As "ways of finding oneself in the world", felt existential orientations establish the most basic self/world mutuality in experience – long before conscious reflection sets in and even at a point "before" it makes sense to separate at all a subject of experience from the world it confronts. Examples for existential feelings are feelings of connectedness to the world, feelings of familiarity and security, feelings of belonging to a group or to other people in general, feelings of being in control and feeling capable of this or that action, but also a quite general sense of the "being" of worldly entities, of oneself, and of others as fellow persons. The key for present purposes is that existential feelings are usually so deeply engrained in a person's overall perspective on the world that one is at a loss as regards their simulation or deliberate "deployment" (see Slaby & Stephan 2008 for a more detailed discussion of Ratcliffe's proposal).

[7] For reasons of space, I will not discuss Zahavi's interesting and original phenomenological critique of the empathy-as-simulation literature. To Zahavi, the cognitively demanding form of empathy discussed here rests on a primordial form of intersubjectivity which is regularly missed by authors in the simulation tradition, so that they mistakenly think that our access to another person's mentality can only be established through such high-level simulative activities; see Zahavi (2001).

[8] As briefly sketched here, the interactive story is obviously still incomplete. It is important to include lower-level mechanisms of attunement and resonance into the theory, so as to find room for a pre-cognitive relationality – probably established and sustained on the level of affect and affect attunement – that sets the stage for more sophisticated forms of interactive engagement. The authors here mentioned usually attempt to supply such a foundation (Froese & Fuchs 2012, Krueger 2009)

[9] In fairness, Rifkin is not too far afield when it comes the recognition of vulnerability, neediness and mortality as the foundation that backs a stance of mutual recognition and sympathy. It is clear that he places something like this close to the heart of what he means by "empathy": "The empathic impulse is an acknowledgment that each life is unique and therefore precious, that all living creatures are vulnerable, subject to pain and suffering, and eager to be and thrive. Empathy smacks of mortality, is oriented by the smell of death and is directed to celebrating another's life. It is the very acceptance of death that allows one to empathize with another's struggle to live." (Rifkin 2009, p. 344/5 – see also p. 41). The problem is not the substance of these claims but rather the channeling of that important insight into the narrow fray of empathy – mutual recognition, respect, acceptance of the other is a much broader set of comportments than the problematic operation of empathy that we have discussed here.

[10] Obviously, this is a highly condensed characterization. Important foundations have been laid by Max Horkheimer in his seminal paper "Traditional and Critical Theory" (1972 [1939]); some early writings of Jürgen Habermas mark an important further stage in the development of a critical theory of the natural sciences (see Habermas 1971, 1973), a good systematizing overview is given by Geuss (1981). A current gloss on the approach, already geared to the specific situation of the contemporary neurosciences, is provided by Hartmann (2012).

[11] Critical approaches to neuroscience that begin to execute a program of the kind suggested here can be found in the collections of Ortega & Vidal (2011) and Choudhury & Slaby (2012). A recent monograph by Rose & Abi-Rached (2013) provides encompassing genealogical and sociological analyses of the Neuro industry but for the most part refrains from adopting a discernibly critical position on its subject matter. Thoroughly critical, on the other hand, but much less empirically informed is a polemical manifesto by Tallis (2011).

[12] This is, again, how de Waal frames his conclusion: "I derive great optimism from empathy's evolutionary antiquity. It makes it a robust trait that will develop in virtually every human being so that society can count on it and try to foster and grow it. It is a human universal" (de Waal 2009, 209).

[13] Jesse Prinz (2011) has helpfully surveyed objections to the notion of grounding a naturalist account of human morality on empathy and related pro-social sentiments. Epistemically, the range of empathy is usually restricted to the local and familiar to an extent we cannot tolerate for morality, it can thus all too easily be manipulated (rhetorically, with images etc.). Empathy is often not motivational in the right way; it carries no normative weight in moral deliberation unless one is ready to violate the naturalistic fallacy objection. Moreover, as an occurring affective state, it is usually biased towards the *here and now* and thus always prone to overrule longer-term rational deliberation.

[14] To be sure, the human sciences are here meant only in their highly simplified popular and popularized formats – which are, for the most part, the only sort of "science" Rifkin and many like-minded authors bother to discuss.

[15] On the unrelenting demand to make ever more choices – and to cultivate one's tastes and "authentic" personality accordingly – while the possibilities for effective (political) agency dwindle, see Giddens (1991) and, again, Brinkmann (2008); on this and related "paradoxes of capitalism", see Hartmann & Honneth (2006).

[16] Much more could be said here, obviously. The distant echo in this passage of Richard Sennett's classical study on the fall of public man is deliberate (see Sennett 2003[1977]).

[17] One should not be surprised that conservative pundits begin to jump on the "social brain" bandwagon, for instance notorious columnist David Brooks, who wastes no opportunity to proclaim a revolution in our understanding of man and a thorough dismantling of left-leaning intellectual endeavors: "Brain science helps fill the hole left by the atrophy of theology and philosophy." (Brooks 2011).

[18] As Peter Goldie has persuasively argued, emotions tend to "skew the epistemic landscape", which means they not only influence particular cognitive and evaluative attitudes, but crucially also the very normative standards on which meta-assessments of one's own outlook on the world are performed; see Goldie (2004).

[19] With this and with what follows, I subscribe in broad outlines to the critical diagnosis of contemporary neuroscience brought forth by Catherine Malabou. Rhetorically, she asks: "How could we not note a similarity of functioning between this economic organization and neuronal organization? How could we not interrogate the parallelism between the transformation of the spirit of capitalism (between the sixties and the nineties) and the modification, brought about approximately at the same period, of our view of cerebral structures?" (Malabou 2008, p. 41)