

AS09-03 - EMPATHY AND NEUROSCIENCES. EPISTEMOLOGICAL REMARKS ON A COMPLEX INTERRELATION BETWEEN THE CONCEPTUAL AND THE EXPERIMENTAL LEVELS

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Empathy became a fashionable phenomenon to study with the functional imaging techniques of modern neurosciences. To many, neurosciences (in particular the theory of *mirror neurons*) are providing the scientific proof that empathy is a “real” phenomenon.

The studies addressing the empathy for human pain will be used here to discuss the relation between the concept of empathy as it was conceived in philosophy and psychology at one side, and the experimental results at the other side. It will be shown that the conception of empathy has changed across centuries, moving from a philosophical standpoint to a psychological one, and eventually to current neurophysiology. Even in modern neuroscience the definition of empathy widely varies in the various studies; it oscillates between an automatic and preconscious phenomenon to one influenced by drives, beliefs and expectations.

In conclusion, this review shows that modern neurosciences do not provide a simple neurological basis for the classic concept of empathy (seen as a unitary and stable phenomenon). On the contrary, they contribute to reshape the original concept, which now tends to be subdivided in different features related to different patterns of brain activity, with both top-down and bottom-up arms.