

**AVAILABILITY – ANALYSIS OF AN  
EFFECTIVE PRO-SOCIAL ATTITUDE AND  
APPLICATION TO THE MEDICAL FIELD**

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# ABSTRACT

## *Short Abstract*

Sympathy is often considered to be a pro-attitude central to our social lives. I argue, however, that it is epistemically weak and thereby not effective on its own. We are in need of another attitude that combines the motivational aspect of sympathy with a more cognitive component that enables us to understand others. In this thesis, I argue that availability, a concept introduced by Gabriel Marcel, is just the candidate we are looking for. I offer a definition of availability, describe its effects and its role and argue that it is essential to our social lives because it allows us to help others efficiently and to bond with them. I apply my results to medical care and claim that availability should be promoted and taught in medical schools.

## *Long Abstract*

Empathy and sympathy are widely praised. Many consider that our ability to be moved by the plight of others is central to our social and moral lives. It unites us, allows us to bond and, very importantly, motivates us to act morally towards others by helping them. By putting so much emphasis on those emotional attitudes, however, we tend to forget that understanding others accurately is just as essential. We can be deeply empathetic and sympathetic, but if we don't understand what someone needs, we will not be able to effectively help her. Felt understanding is also a key ingredient of bonding and satisfying relationships, and we all seem to long for it. How then can we make empathy or sympathy effective and how should we complement them?

I argue that we can find a strong candidate in Gabriel Marcel's concept of availability. Availability seems to involve the motivational pro-social element of sympathy, but in addition, it puts us in an ideal position to understand others accurately. In the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several philosophers such as Marcel, as well as Simone Weil and Martin Buber, described availability and claimed it is crucial for our ability to relate to others. However, none of them provided a precise and systematic treatment of the notion. Although the concept has been popularised by Carl Rogers in psychotherapy under the names of "empathy" and "active listening", it is still not clear what it is. Nonetheless, all those who speak about it say that it is highly important. The aim of this thesis is to build the case for availability by investigating more precisely what it is and what its effects are and to start to explore its practical applications by describing its role in the field of medical care.

In the first part of the dissertation, I review existing accounts of availability to see if we can understand it better. I argue that these do not provide us with a definition of availability, but that they enable us to identify its four core features. Based on these features, I am then able to define availability. I can then describe the phenomenon more precisely and

systematically and contrast it with other concepts that are closely related and with which it could be confused such as empathy, sympathy, care and respect.

In the second part of the thesis, I investigate the effects of availability and the role that it plays in our social lives. I argue that it greatly enhances our chances to understand another accurately. I distinguish between two types of interpersonal understanding, propositional and experiential, to further describe the effects of availability. I claim that being available is an efficient way to come to know what others need and to be motivated to help them. Although it is not the only means to reach this result, availability has the advantage of sustaining feelings of sympathy and closeness which allow us to bond with others and to develop relationships with them. I also try to make sense of Marcel's claim that we see others as persons only when we are available to them. To do that, I delve into what interpersonal understanding consists in and why it is so important to us and yields closeness.

I finish by applying the work done to the domain of medicine. I argue that the ability of physicians to be available towards their patients is central to good care and that it would be better to promote availability rather than sympathy in medical schools. I prepare the ground for future research by discussing how the claims defended in this thesis could be empirically tested and how availability could be taught.

# INTRODUCTION

## *The need for an epistemically strong pro-social attitude*

Empathy has been an important topic of research in philosophy, but also in psychology and in cognitive sciences in general. With roots going back to Smith and Hume, it has been taken to play a crucial role in our social and moral lives. More specifically, it is argued that empathy is essential in understanding others and motivating us to help them (see for example Maibom 2017; Coplan 2011; Maibom 2014). There has been, however, little consensus on what empathy is and the term has been used to refer to an array of emotional and cognitive phenomena. Nowadays, in philosophy at least, the term mainly refers to affective empathy, which is understood as the experience of feeling what someone else is experiencing (or something close enough) without losing sight of the fact that we are having this experience as a result of seeing (knowing or believing) that this person is having that experience (de Vignemont and Singer 2006; Maibom 2017). In front of someone sad, feeling empathy consists in experiencing her sadness and seeing it as “hers”.

Empirical research, however, suggests that it is rather sympathy that directly motivates helping behaviour (Batson 2011). Sympathy is an emotional response that we have for another and “from the perspective of ‘one-caring’” (Darwall 1998, 261). It occurs when we desire someone’s wellbeing and evaluate her situation as good or bad for her. For example, seeing that Loris is in danger might make us feel worried for him, whether he is feeling fear or not. Sympathy involves feeling sorry for another, worried about her, happy for her, etc. This latter attitude has not raised a lot of philosophical interest, but it has been at the centre of much research in psychology. Daniel Batson, particularly, has conducted numerous experiments to test whether humans do help for altruistic reasons (for the sake of the person in need) and concluded that sympathy – which he calls empathic concern – motivates altruistic behaviour (Batson 2011).

Empathy can lead to sympathy, but it can also lead to personal distress, which is self-oriented (Singer and Klimecki 2014). Personal distress is a reaction of distress caused by strong empathic feelings (Maibom 2017). For example, we might feel someone’s sadness so intensely that we genuinely become sad ourselves and lose track of the fact that we are not the person suffering. As a result, we need to handle our own distress and are not able to deal with the other’s suffering. Sympathy, rather than empathy, has thus been seen as the direct and central pro-social attitude. It motivates helping behaviour and helps develop satisfying relationships (Davis and Oathout 1987; Padilla-Walker et al. 2015).

Some nevertheless criticise the praising of sympathy because it faces moral limitations. Studies have shown that it can make us partial towards the object of our sympathy and can motivate us to act unfairly towards others (Batson et al. 1995). Furthermore, we are more likely to experience sympathy for those who belong to a shared group (Stürmer et al. 2006). While we are also easily moved by the plight of one person, we tend to remain indifferent when many are suffering, thus failing to get involved and to help (Slovic 2010). In short, our ability to sympathise is biased and this feeling can motivate us to act unfairly towards the ones we do not feel for. Those criticisms do not undermine the fact that sympathy is pro-social, but rather show that its effects are not always morally justified.

There is another threat, however, to the pro-sociality of sympathy that is less widely acknowledged: sympathy is not informative regarding the situation of the person in need. When we feel sorry for someone, our feelings inform how we evaluate that person's condition on the basis of a prior understanding of her situation. But it does not add anything to that understanding. For example, when we feel worried about someone, it shows us that we evaluate her position as dangerous for her or as being threatening in some way. This feeling, however, teaches us nothing about that person and her conditions. Rather, it is because we are already aware of some features of that person's situation that we see it as dangerous for her and thereby experience sympathy.

This implies that sympathy motivates us to help, but in itself, it is blind regarding how the helping should be carried out. This rather depends on our prior understanding of the situation of the one in need. If our understanding is inaccurate, sympathy might prompt us to act in a way that proves to be inefficient or even, potentially harmful. Consider the following example put forward by Jodi Halpern:

When this woman was pregnant, she expressed fear of childbirth. Resonating with her anxiety, her obstetrician quickly reassured her that she could be kept from severe pain and that, if necessary, she could be medicated to the point that she would be "out of it". This response terrified her, because her fear was of losing control, either by being groggy from anaesthesia or being "tied down" to an intravenous line. She had, it turns out, been a rape victim who had experienced this kind of helplessness and immobility. (Halpern 2001, 80)

In this example, the physician seems to feel sympathy and empathy for her patient and she truly wants to help. But because she is mistaken about what the problem of this woman is, she misjudges what she needs and ends up doing more harm than good. Here, although the intention of the obstetrician is pro-social, her sympathy has no pro-social effect.

The same case can be built regarding the effect of sympathy on relationships. Sympathy plays a key role in relationship satisfaction because it is important to us to feel that others value us and care about what happens to us. But it is also very important to us that others understand

us accurately. Feeling valued and respected is in fact closely tied to feeling understood (Morelli, Torre, and Eisenberger 2014). The impression of having been misunderstood leads to “sadness, depression, dissatisfaction, abandonment, loneliness, irritability, insecurity, confusion, and annoyance, along with feelings of being attacked, pressured, devalued, and unappreciated” (Condon 2008). This suggests that if we misunderstand another, the sympathy that we can experience towards the other will have little pro-social effect on our relationship (Oishi, Krochik, and Akimoto 2010; Reis et al. 2000).

Sympathy seems to be effective in delivering its pro-social benefits only when matched with a satisfactory understanding of the person who is its object. Therefore, if we aim at enhancing pro-sociality, sympathy alone should not be the target. It would be more efficient to promote an attitude that combines its pro-social motivation with an accurate understanding of the other. One possibility could be to pair up sympathy and cognitive empathy together. Cognitive empathy refers to all the cognitive processes that we use to attribute mental states to others and to predict their actions (Maibom 2017). This pairing could compensate for the epistemic deficiency of sympathy. However, it is not clear how those two phenomena should be conjoined. Should they happen concomitantly, or should one precede the other? Furthermore, should they be related to each other or not? What the most effective combination would be is not straightforward. In addition, because they are processes that are independent of each other, it is not readily comprehensible how they can constitute an overall coherent complex attitude.

#### *A Candidate: Availability*

I found a potential answer to this problem in the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel. Marcel describes the attitude he calls “availability” as being “present” and “open” to others. According to him, our interactions with others are of two different qualitative types. Sometimes, we feel close to others. They seem to be concerned about us, to understand us and to respect us. They feel “present” (Marcel 1950, 205 I) and “entirely with [us]” (Marcel 1998, 235). At different times, we have the sense that others are not really there with us, they seem far away (Marcel 1950, 205). They do not hear us, and we do not seem to matter to them. In the first case, people are available to us whereas in the second, they are unavailable.

Availability appears to be constituted by acute attention (“presence”) to another. When we are available to someone, we are completely focused on that person and are not distracted by self-regarding considerations (Marcel 1997, 11 II). We are open to her and willing to “receive” her, that is, to understand her and accept her as she is (Marcel 1967, 45). We also care about the ones we are available to, feel sympathy for them, are concerned about them and are interested in them for themselves (Marcel 1999, 78-79). Availability thus involves both sympathy and attention for its object. It is fundamentally pro-social, but it enhances our understanding of the other person as well.

According to Marcel, availability has many benefits. The most important one is that it enables us to develop a genuine intersubjective relationship with another, that is, a relation in which we both relate as persons (Marcel 1999, 54; 1998, 235). Availability is also fundamentally pro-social in the sense that it consists in putting our whole resources, cognitive, emotional, spiritual at the other person's disposal. Although Marcel does not develop this point in length, it is clear from his writing that availability involves a motivation to help.

Marcel is not the only one to have described this complex, somewhat elusive, attitude. We can find similar descriptions in the works of his contemporaries Martin Buber, and Simone Weil. Buber's "I-Thou" relationship seems to be similar to availability. It is a connection with another that is not permeated with means and instrumental interest (Buber 1937, 43). It is not one of appropriation (Buber 1937, 63). Rather, the "I-Thou" relationship is characterised by presence and acceptance and, even, love (Buber 1937, 15, 78, 117). It is also the only relationship in which we are with another as a person (Buber 1937, 8, 17).

Simone Weil speaks of "attention" which is a type of acute disinterested focusing (Weil 2002, 118). When we pay attention to others, we can know them and understand them: "the soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth" (Weil 1959, 115). When we attend to others, we are interested in them for themselves and care about them (Weil 1959, 107). As a result, we also feel sympathy for the one we are paying attention to (Weil 1959, 147). When we are attentive to others in that way, we see them as persons, as "men" (Weil 1959, 115). Furthermore, we are motivated to do what is right, and hence, to help them (Weil 2002, 119).

Neither Buber nor Weil offered a systematic analysis of this attitude, nor a precise definition. The study of their work remained marginalised and little philosophical work has been done on availability, especially in philosophy. Iris Murdoch speaks of Weil's concept of attention (Murdoch 1971), which is further developed by Susan Wolf (Wolf 2014). This notion is also mentioned by Nel Noddings as part of her definition of care (Noddings 2002). But none of them substantially deepened the work of their predecessors.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the concept of availability has had a much bigger impact in the domain of psychotherapy. What Carl Rogers describes as the ideal attitude of the psychotherapist sounds extremely close to availability. He was, in fact, inspired by the work of Buber. According to Rogers, the ideal attitude of the counsellor, which he calls empathy, consists in trying to understand another, in this case, the client, "from the other person's point of view, to sense how it feels to him, to achieve his frame of reference in regard to the thing he is talking about" (Rogers 1961, 331-32). Affective empathy is part of the process (Rogers 1961, 284). This attention to the client is motivated by an "unconditional positive regard" for that person (Rogers 1961, 62), which is a form of caring for or prizing of that person (Rogers 1961, 62, 84). Because of this caring, this attitude leads the therapist to feel sympathy for her client

(Rogers 1961, 82). This stance also involves a total acceptance of her (Rogers 1961, 174). She is not being evaluated (Rogers 1961, 331). According to Rogers as well, this posture allows us to see others as persons (Rogers 1961, 222). The main impact of this attitude is that it enables the other to accept herself as she is, which paradoxically leads to positive change (Rogers 1961, 17). Rogers does not say that the attitude that he describes motivates us to help others, perhaps because he confines his analysis to the setting of psychotherapy. However, it clearly promotes the relationship between the therapist and the client and *in fine* helps the patient. Although Rogers depicts his concept of empathy more precisely and in more length than some of the philosophers mentioned above, he, too, did not provide a systematic analysis nor an unambiguous definition of that stance.

While the attitude described by Marcel and others has elicited only modest philosophical interest, the work of Carl Rogers has been extremely influential in the domain of psychotherapy. His work inspired a whole new school of psychotherapy, person-centred therapy, and the attitude of the counsellor has been characterised as “active listening”. Although there has been quite an amount of empirical research on active listening, little to no conceptual work has been done on the concept itself (see for example Drollinger, Comer, and Warrington 2006; Fassaert et al. 2007; Bodie 2011).

Thus, although all these authors describe this attitude as essential to our social – and for some, moral – lives, it is still unclear what it is exactly. However, it seems that this attitude could play the pro-social role that sympathy could not fulfil. What Marcel calls “availability” appears to have both a strong cognitive component involving acute attention to the target of the attitude and a conative or emotional one that involves care and sympathy for her. This suggests that availability could effectively promote satisfying relationships and motivate efficient helping.

#### *Value, Objectives and Methods of the Thesis*

If availability does play the role those authors have attributed to it and, especially, if it is central to satisfying relationships with others and motivates efficient helping, it is important to investigate further and to determine what it is and how we can apply this attitude and perhaps learn to acquire it. Carrying this out would first have a conceptual value. Since several authors describe this attitude as central to our social lives, it would be useful to clarify what this attitude consists in. Furthermore, if it is central to our social lives, the study of availability and a more precise understanding of its effects and of how it elicits them could improve our understanding of how we relate to others. Lastly, this work could have a practical value. If the claims about the effects of availability are verified, availability could be promoted to enhance pro-social behaviour. It could thereby improve our relationships with others as well as our capacity to concretely help each other. This could be particularly valuable for professions which involve a strong relational component and/or that require helping others or responding to their needs.

In this thesis, I start to carry out this programme. My aim is to explore what availability is, what it does and what we can do with it. More precisely, I investigate what it means to be available to someone, the different forms it can take and its ontological status. I present a definition that is precise enough to determine its mechanisms and effects. I discuss the relations and differences between availability and other closely related attitudes such as empathy and sympathy. I examine its effects and how they are produced. I finish by outlining ideas for future research regarding the applications of this attitude by describing the role that availability plays in the medical domain and describing ways to teach it. The aim of this thesis is thus not only to do conceptual work and to enhance our understanding of the matter, but also to do so in a way that can be practically useful.

Although I intend to apply the result of my analysis of availability to the medical field, the definition and the analysis should nevertheless be general so that they can be potentially exploited in many different contexts such as other health care professions, teaching and even sales. The role that availability plays in those other settings and what form of it is appropriate or most effective in them could then be further investigated. In addition, since the aim is to make availability a notion that is clear and can be empirically tested and taught, it is important to make the definition actionable. That means that it should define availability in terms of known psychological processes that can be empirically studied and, potentially, taught and learned.

The aim is also to be lucid about what availability can and cannot do. This thesis intends to contribute to the understanding and promotion of pro-social behaviour. That availability promotes such behaviour does not imply that it is necessary or sufficient for bonding with others and helping them. I will explain when availability has a value and when it has none. We will see, for example, that distinct forms of availability are efficient in different situations. I will, however, not address moral questions such as whether we have a duty to be available to others and if so, when. The aim of this thesis is to explore the descriptive aspects of availability rather than the normative ones, which might be studied in further work. Some moral limitations of this attitude are nevertheless discussed at the end of the dissertation.

The choice of the medical domain over others is partly contingent. It is mainly due to the fact that I wrote my thesis part-time at the Institute for Ethics History and Humanities of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Geneva. I was surrounded by physicians and humanities researchers all working on topics related to medicine and biomedical ethics. In addition, I did a 6-month internship at the Clinical Ethics Centre of the Hospitals of Paris. During that time, I was even more immersed in that field. Furthermore, medicine is an ideal domain of application for the attitude of availability. One of the main roles of the physician is to help the patients regarding their health issues and to do that, it has been long recognised that the relationship with the patient is critical. Lastly, there are teachings devised to support the development of relational skills. The promotion of availability in medical schools is thus

conceivable. The medical field thus became the perfect option for applying my work on availability.

My research was inspired by Gabriel Marcel. I encountered his writing when I was in high school and remembered it because his account of intersubjectivity – of how we see others as conscious subjects of experience and relate with them as such – allowed for non-conflictual relationships with others that are meaningful and essential to our lives and in which others are our equal, unlike most other accounts of intersubjectivity. Because of this, Marcel holds a special place in this dissertation. Marcel's aim was, however, not to make his concept of availability actionable. In fact, as I will explain in [chapter 1](#), he seemingly thought that it could not be made so without partly losing sight of what availability is. For that reason, although I was inspired by Marcel, I chose to depart from his work and his vision in order to deepen our understanding of availability.

To offer a precise definition of availability, I will apply conceptual analysis. I will start by looking at descriptions made by the authors mentioned above to see if a definition can be drawn from them. We will see that this is not the case, but that we can nevertheless identify four core features of availability ([chapter 1](#)). I will then set satisfaction requirements for a new definition and defend and describe my own definition. Conceptual analysis will also be used in [chapter 3](#). I will describe other concepts that are close to availability and contrast them to see where the specificity of availability lies.

Besides, this dissertation involves a lot of descriptive work to understand what availability is and what its effects are. To carry out that agenda, I will appeal to the as famous as vague armchair method. I will introspect and test my intuitions by analysing an array of experiences in different situations. However, what it means to be available in practice and what its effects are, are not purely philosophical questions. Empirical sciences, especially psychology, should have their say on it. Empathy, sympathy, as well as interpersonal understanding are popular objects of scientific research. I will therefore compare my claims with this literature, to see if they hold.

Often, the second method will complement the first one. For example, in [chapter 4](#), I describe the effects of availability and argue that one main effect of availability is an understanding of the person who is the object of availability. At first, I will have to turn to empirical data to explore the effects of interpersonal understanding. In [chapter 5](#), however, I will show that a thorough philosophical description of interpersonal understanding explains the occurrence of its effects. At other times, empirical data will have to be substituted for philosophical analysis. For example, empirical experiments are better than philosophical analysis at telling us how availability can be taught effectively (see [chapter 6](#)).

This methodological mix is justified by the object of this dissertation and its aim. First, as I just explained, its object is not entirely *a priori* and it deals, for instance, with concrete

psychological mechanisms that can be objects of both theoretical and empirical research. If our object of inquiry has been empirically investigated, it is important to compare our claims to empirical data, if only to verify them. Second, the rationale for this thesis is to find out what availability is, what its effects are, and how those results can be used. Any means that can help us reach those goals are relevant.

This methodology makes this dissertation an interdisciplinary work that goes beyond the confines of pure philosophy. For some, this might be methodologically questionable. Can we do philosophy for empirical purposes? Should I have left this work to psychologists altogether? I will not argue here regarding what philosophy is, what kind of questions it asks and how it can be properly done. This could be an entire dissertation topic. I will argue, however, that saying what philosophy is, does not tell us what it can be used for. Philosophers can play a role beyond their own field. For psychologists to be able to study an object empirically, and especially an object such as a mental state (or action), they need first to understand their object of inquiry well enough to know what to test and how. This implies that a lot of conceptual work can be necessary before the experimentation. Philosophers' analytic skills can come in handy for that. They can also bring to the attention of scientists phenomena that they had been ignoring, such as availability. In addition, they can also help them understand their results. For example, in [chapter 5](#), I show how a philosophical description of what it is to understand another person enables us to see why it leads to closeness and relationship satisfaction. The philosopher and the psychologist can thus complement each other. Here, I have attempted to do the conceptual and descriptive work necessary for an empirical investigation of availability and for convincing psychologists that it is a topic worth exploring. At some points, this required the use of empirical data, most of all in [chapters 4 and 6](#).

#### *Plan and Outline of the Thesis*

This thesis is divided in two parts of three chapters each. In the first part, I explore what availability is and in the second what it does and what we can do with it. In the [first chapter](#), I review existing accounts of availability to come to a better grasp of the phenomenon and evaluate the need for a new definition. A prominent place is given to Gabriel Marcel because he is the one who described availability in most detail and because he plays a special role in this thesis. I then review thematically the descriptions of availability given by the other authors mentioned above. From there, I show that these accounts do not depict availability precisely enough to have a clear idea of what this attitude and its effects are, and that many questions remain unanswered. I show that we can nevertheless identify four core features which we can use to develop a new definition. I also argue that the review of literature shows that the topic of availability is almost completely ignored today in philosophy. I conclude that if availability has the importance it is usually given, we need to give it more attention and try better understanding it.

In [chapter 2](#), I pursue the exploration of availability by offering a new definition. I start by discussing how I can proceed to develop this new definition and set conditions the definition should satisfy. I then outline my definition, explain it and argue for it. I explore what being available practically consists in by showing that it admits of degrees and that it usually is a process that lasts in time, at least minimally. I also explain that availability is not limited to face-to-face encounters. I then examine what kind of entity availability is and argue that in opposition to what other authors have said, it is not an attitude in the strict sense, but a mental action. In order to clarify how the concept can be applied, I also discuss what criteria one must satisfy to qualify as either a subject or an object of availability. I end this chapter by comparing my understanding of the phenomenon to those outlined by the other authors discussed in [chapter 1](#) and conclude that my understanding is overall consistent with theirs, although it implies the rejection of some features of availability identified in that first chapter.

In [chapter 3](#), I further our understanding of availability by contrasting it with other related phenomena such as empathy, sympathy, care and respect, and showing how they relate to each other. I argue that what is distinctive about availability is that it involves both the cognitive aspect of trying to understand another and the conative one of valuing that person. This concept thus cannot be substituted by other more widely recognised ones. This chapter also helps disambiguate the debate around sympathy, empathy and care by describing each notion separately and explaining how they are connected to each other.

In [chapter 4](#), the first chapter of the second part, I explore the effects and the role of availability. I argue that the main effect of availability is to enhance our chances of understanding its object accurately. I show that this understanding has an important epistemic value setting the available person in a good position to know how to help another best. It also makes her feel close and connected to the one she understands. Availability also impacts its recipient by making that person feel understood and valued. Overall, it facilitates relationships and makes them more satisfying. I go on to discuss the role that availability plays. Observing that being available is not the only way to induce interpersonal understanding, I show that it is nevertheless an effective one and that other ways do not promote closeness and satisfying relationships as well.

To enhance our understanding of the effects of availability, I evaluate, in [chapter 5](#), the claim made by Marcel and other authors that we see others as persons only when we are available to them. After looking at Marcel's work to elucidate that claim – which I argue it only partially succeeds in doing – I provide a detailed description of interpersonal understanding and from there am able to explain it. I show that perspective taking gives us a sense of what it is for the other person to be in a situation, which is as close as we can get to experiencing her as a subject. I also argue that we can understand others only to the extent that we share the

same world view. This allows us to comprehend why understanding, and thus availability, leads to closeness and why feeling understood is so crucial in relationships.

In the last chapter of this thesis ([chapter 6](#)) I apply the work done to the domain of medical care. I discuss the role of the physician and argue that availability is an important and effective tool to fulfil it. I describe what availability looks like in the medical practice and what degree of availability is most effective. I then argue that it can be more effective than a certain form of empathy that is often considered the ideal attitude of the physician nowadays. Claiming that availability should thus be promoted in medical schools, I investigate how it could be done. I finish by outlining ideas for future research.

### *Why “availability”?*

I would like to conclude this introduction with a few disambiguating words about the term “availability”. As explained above, Marcel is the only one to have called the attitude under consideration by this name. Many names have been given to it such as “listening”, “empathy”, “attention”, “loving/caring attention”. The problem, it seems, is that we have no term that solely refers to the attitude described by Marcel and others. This implies that we need to invent a new word for it or make a choice among other expressions that can be used to refer to it.

I have chosen to go with Marcel’s term “availability”. One reason is that it seemed that other terms were not more satisfying. The expressions “loving attention” and “caring attention” induce the idea that availability involves love or care, which, as we will see in [chapter 2](#) does not appear to be the case. The term “empathy” has already been used to refer to many different attitudes and calling availability “empathy” would only have led to more confusion. “Listening” is not adequate because availability encompasses more than that and, depending on the situation, can even comprise no listening at all. Lastly, “attention” seemed more appropriate, but not precise enough, since availability refers to a particular way of paying attention. Since no option appeared satisfying, I decided to keep “availability”, mainly because I started this work by studying Gabriel Marcel and began to use the term before encountering other options. Even if this term is also somewhat unsatisfactory, it has the advantage of not being as used as “empathy” or “attention” are to refer to mental states and processes and, as a result, can perhaps be given an atypical sense more easily.

If we are going to use the term “availability”, however, it is important to see that it should not be understood in its main common sense. “Availability” usually means the “capability of being employed or made use of” (« Availability, n. » s. d.). An object O is available to someone S for  $\varphi$ -ing if S can use O to  $\varphi$  and there is no constraint preventing it. For example, a seat is available if no one is using it and S, or anyone it is available to, can choose to sit on it. Then the seat will not be available anymore; it will be occupied. The same goes for many other examples. An amount of money, a tool, or a vehicle is available to S if S can use it freely.

This is not exactly true when we speak of people being available. When we say that Juliet is available to help Sam move out, for example, we do not mean that Juliet is at Sam's disposal and that he can use her to move out like he would use a tool or a van. Rather, we want to imply that Juliet is ready and willing to put some of her resources at Sam's disposal, so that he can benefit from them. Those resources vary from material ones such as money, a car, a house, to intellectual ones such as intelligence (through advice), other skills like sewing or IT knowledge, and even affective resources such as compassion. Object availability thus differs from subject availability in that an object will simply be used by S whereas a subject will herself act and make S benefit from her action upon S's demand. Hence, for example, when a professor says that she is available to answer questions after the class, she is saying that she will be ready to answer questions after the class; students only need to come and ask them.

From this description, we can draw the following conclusions: (1) Being available is not a state but a disposition to be used in some way or an ability and willingness to do something for someone. (2) The word "availability" itself leaves it open what  $\phi$  is, which will depend on the situation. (3) When a person P or an object O is available to someone S for  $\phi$ , she remains so until S decides to make use of O and  $\phi$  or to ask P to  $\phi$ . The change happens through an action performed by S. As we will see, these are precisely the points on which our way of using the word "availability" will differ.

Our usage is proper to Gabriel Marcel's work, although in daily conversations "availability" can sometimes refer to an attitude of openness and presence (more frequently so in French). In Marcel's sense of the term, it seems that it is one's mental resources (cognitive and emotional) that we put at another's disposal when we are available to her. Typically, we are free from other preoccupations and are able to fully dedicate our mental resources to the person we are available to. As we use this term, there is no need to specify what we are available to do because we always mean availability of cognitive and affective resources. Furthermore, Marcel does not understand availability as a disposition. Being available does not mean being able to allocate our resources to another when asked for. It rather refers to the state we are in when we are in fact devoting our mental resources to another. In addition, there is no use for a request or any action on the part of the one we are available to. We can be available to someone who did not ask for us to be available. That person might perhaps not even want our availability or be aware of it. Thus, Marcel's sense of "availability" diverges from the common one. It is important to keep these differences in mind as we proceed to investigate what availability is and to try not to let us be too influenced by the general sense of the term.

# **PART I – DEFINING AND DESCRIBING AVAILABILITY**

## **1. Availability in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

The aim of this chapter is twofold. On the one hand, I review the literature on availability to come to a better grasp of this notion. On the other hand, I show that the existing descriptions of availability lack clarity and leave a number of questions unanswered. I conclude that we need a new description of availability.

This review will consider only authors from the 20<sup>th</sup> century on because there seem to have been a sudden burst of interest in this question after the First World War and because there is, to my knowledge, no major contribution to that topic before then. Also, while trying to find descriptions of availability and make a selection, we face two difficulties. First, although we seem to be familiar with the attitude of availability, there is no consensual term used to refer to it. Availability has been called “attention”, “loving attention”, “openness”, “listening”, or “empathy” among others. This makes it difficult to find descriptions of availability. Second, there is almost no book or paper on availability itself. Most of the descriptions that we can find are short sections of works on other topics. This contributes to the difficulty of identifying descriptions of availability. In addition, because many of them are very short, they are only moderately informative and quite similar to each other. This is why the aim of this review is not to be extensive or to cover all descriptions of availability ever given. It only tries to give a good overview of the way availability has been described.

In the first section, I describe Gabriel Marcel’s account of availability. His account is treated separately from the other ones for several reasons. First, although Marcel did not provide a systematic description of availability, his account is one of the most detailed ones. It is thus worthwhile spending more time describing it. Second, this thesis was inspired by Marcel and aims at exploring some of the claims he made about availability. This gives his account a special importance. Lastly, and because of the first two reasons, Marcel’s account was used as a reference against which other accounts were confronted to see whether the attitude they describe is availability or not.

In the second section, I give a representative overview of what other authors have said about availability. This overview is thematic and describes the features of availability that have been identified by these authors. As many of these authors give only short descriptions of availability and as the different accounts are very consistent and point to the same features of identity, a presentation of their descriptions author by author would have been too repetitive.

In the third section, I take stock. I first offer a synthesis of what we have learnt about availability and identify four main characteristics of availability that we can draw from it. I then offer a criticism of the accounts previously described. I show that the existing accounts of availability lack precision and leave some aspects of availability unexplored. I also claim that the review of literature shows that there was a burst of interest in the topic of availability at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that grew in fields like psychotherapy, but slowly decreased to become very marginal in philosophy. I argue that if availability does have the importance it has been taken to have, it deserves more philosophical attention. I conclude that this justifies the two aims of this project: providing a better understanding of availability and drawing attention to a phenomenon that plays a very important role in our social lives.

### **1.1 Gabriel Marcel's Account of Availability**

Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), a French existentialist philosopher and phenomenologist, seems to have been the first one to use the term “availability”. This attitude plays an important role in his philosophy, especially in his account of intersubjectivity.<sup>1</sup> However, presenting Marcel's concept of availability is made difficult by several factors. First, he was not a systematic philosopher (and did not aim at being one) and his discussions of availability are disseminated throughout his work. Second, he thought that phenomena in which we are personally engaged in, such as death, intersubjectivity, and, of course, availability, cannot be grasped and analysed without losing sight of what they are. To understand them, we need to experience them, refrain from abstracting too much, and remain very close to that experience (Marcel 1998, 206). This is why Marcel's study of availability consists mainly in giving examples and describing it in terms that are evocative but somewhat elusive and unclear. He thought that any attempt to break down more the attitude of availability was doomed to fail. Nevertheless, in order to give a good idea of Marcel's account of availability in a few pages, I have tried to reconstruct Marcel's account of availability in a more systematic way. This means that my way of presenting Marcel's concept of availability departs from his. I will let the reader go back to the original texts to see how Marcel approaches it.

Marcel's interest in availability started with the observation that our interactions with others are of two qualitative types that can be illustrated as follows: say that Milena just learnt that her application for her dream job at the newspaper where she has been working as an intern has been rejected and she is confiding in her friend Sandrine to find support. If Sandrine is able to fully pay attention to what Milena is saying, to be concerned about her and to respect her feelings, Milena will feel close to her and even connected to her. Sandrine will seem

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of intersubjectivity in Marcel's philosophy, see [chapter 5](#) and Malbois 2019.

“present” (Marcel 1950, 205 I) and “entirely with [her]” (Marcel 1998, 235) and there will be a “communion” between them (Marcel 1997, 12 II). However, if Sandrine is preoccupied by something else and fails to fully pay attention, or if she does not seem to be concerned about what Milena is saying and what is happening to her, Milena will feel disconnected from her. Sandrine will seem distant to her, as if she was not there with her, but beyond her reach. In the first case, Sandrine is available to Milena. In the second, she is unavailable. Whether people around us are available to us or not matters greatly to us, but it is not clear yet what availability is. Marcel says that the one who is available puts all her being and her resources at the other’s disposal and that she is “present” and “open” to the other and sees her as a subject (Marcel 1950, 205 I). This is not very informative yet, but Marcel describes availability in more detail.

First, Marcel says that we are “present” to another person if we pay attention to her and if we are able to fully focus on her without being distracted by other preoccupations. By contrast, we are unavailable when we cannot fully pay attention to the other person because we have something else in mind (Marcel 1999, 131). Most of the time, we are preoccupied by self-related considerations: what we want, what we need to do, how we look, etc., and it prevents us from paying attention to others. For example, if our friend is worried that she will be late for an appointment, she will not be able to fully focus on us. Her worrying about being late will be on her mind preventing her from giving us a full ear. By contrast, the available being is centred on the other person; she is “hetero-centred” as opposed to “ego-centred” (Marcel 1997, 11 II). She is able to forget about herself and her own preoccupations to focus on the other person and on what is happening to her in the present moment. This is why Marcel insists that vanity and self-centeredness are big obstacles to availability. They make us very ego-centred and prevent us from fully focusing on others.

But being fully focused on another person is not sufficient for availability. We also need to be interested in that person for herself. First, Marcel says that if we are motivated to pay attention to another because of self-regarding motives, then, we are in a way still paying attention to ourselves. Marcel takes the example of a young man going to a party for the first time. He says:

It seems to him that all the other people at the party, none of whom he knows, are looking at him, and looking at him, too, with what meaning glances! Obviously, they are making fun of him, perhaps of his new dinner jacket which does not fit him as well as it should, perhaps of his black bow tie... Thus he is at once preoccupied with himself to the highest possible degree and hypnotised at the same time to quite a supreme degree by others, by what he imagines other people may think of him. (Marcel 1950, 176-77)

The young man is paying attention to others around him, but only to see what they think about him. His preoccupation is ego-centred. As a result, he is not completely focused on them. He is not hetero-centred and thus cannot be available. In order to be available, we need to have no ulterior motive to pay attention to the other. Although Marcel does not explicitly say so, it seems that in addition to having no ulterior motive, the available being is interested in the other person for herself. Marcel takes the example of an informal conversation with someone sitting next to us in the train. At first, we are not really interested in her. We pay attention to her without having any other preoccupation, but as we exchange information about ourselves, we do not really care about her answers. As Marcel says, who the other person is, does not really matter to us. She could be anyone, and we do not feel close to her. But if we suddenly come to realise that we have lived on the same street or that we have a good friend in common, the relationship completely changes. Now, the other person matters to us. Marcel says that “a felt link is formed” (Marcel 1999, 54) and a unity between us is created (Marcel 1999, 54). Even if Marcel does not say so, it seems that the shift of attitude that happens is due to the fact that we start being interested in the other person for herself.

This interpretation of Marcel’s concept of availability is also consistent with his claim that availability involves love or charity. Marcel even says at different times that availability *is* a form of love or/and charity (*agape*) (Marcel 1999, 55; 1998, 234; 1997, 171 II; 1964, 161), without providing further explanation. The connection between availability and love makes sense to the extent that when we love someone, we are in general interested in our beloved for her own sake. If Marcel understood love in that sense, then availability is love because it consists in being interested in someone for her own sake. But as Marcel does not explain why he thinks availability is a form of love, it is unclear if this is all he meant by it.

According to Marcel, when we are available, we are also empathetic<sup>2</sup> to the other person’s plight. When unavailable, we are self-centred and as a result cannot feel empathy for others (Marcel 1999, 78). Even if we would like to, we cannot make ourselves feel it. Marcel says that when we are thus unavailable, “[we] remain an outsider to the other’s suffering; [we] do not manage to make it [ours]” (Marcel 1999, 78). But when we are available, we are genuinely interested in the other person and are not indifferent to what happens to her. That is why we feel empathy for her. Although, again, Marcel does not explicit it, this seems to be why “seeing through the other’s eyes” can help to become available (Marcel 1999, 79). Marcel says that when we imagine that the other person “has been through hardship like [us], has to undergo the same vicissitudes, that [she] has been loved, that other beings ... hoped in [her]” (Marcel 1999, 18), then we come to see her experience as real and start caring about it. We

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<sup>2</sup>Marcel uses the word “sympathy,” but does not define it. It is not clear what he has in mind exactly, but it seems closer to what we call “empathy” today, that is, the ability to feel what another is feeling and attributing it to the other (see [chapter 3](#)).

become interested in the other person for her own sake and can thus become available to her. Putting ourselves in someone else's shoes is a good way to make us available because it tends to elicit empathy and concern for that person. Again, we can only assume that this what Marcel had in mind since he did not explain the connection between empathy, concern for the other and availability.

Marcel also says that availability is a receptive attitude. When available, we are "open" to the other person and ready to "receive" her, as we receive guests at home (Marcel 1967, 45). This means that we "make room in ourselves" for that person (Marcel 1967, 79, 131). Just as we open a door to welcome someone in our house, we can open ourselves to another and let her enter our world. This is figurative and again, it is not clear what Marcel means by that. It seems that to welcome the other in, we need at least to stop thinking about ourselves. In that respect, being open is similar to being hetero-centred. But the concept of "openness" seems to express more than attention to the other. Marcel does not give further description of "openness" but the expressions "being open" to another and "welcoming" her suggest that we accept her as she is, rather than being critical and judgemental. This is supported by the fact that Marcel says that when we become available, we stop "examining" and "judging" the other (Marcel 1967, 53).

According to Marcel, being open is also to be "permeable" or "penetrable" to the other (Marcel 1967, 58), as opposed to being defensive (Marcel 1967, 58). When we are defensive, we try to protect ourselves and we do not let the other person come close to us – physically or affectively – so that she cannot affect us. When we are open and permeable to others, by opposition, we are not worried about our integrity. We are comfortable with ourselves and feel safe enough to stop worrying about ourselves. We can then accept to lower our guard, to be vulnerable and to potentially be changed by this relation. And this is, according to Marcel, what is so special about a relationship animated by availability. It affects us and changes us, unlike objects that remain indifferent to each other (Marcel 1951b, 177). Thus, it seems that being open can be understood as forgetting about ourselves, but also as being non-defensive and accepting another person as she is.

Although Marcel does not insist on this, it seems that availability is not an attitude we are in or not. It rather comes in degrees. He says: "There would be a kind of graduated scale, with something like the mystical communion of souls in worship at the top end, and with something like an ad hoc association for some strictly practical and rigidly defined purpose at the bottom" (Marcel 1950, 178). Whether we are very or only a little bit available depends on how important the other person is to us. In a discussion with a stranger, in the train for example, we can be interested in her and care about her. But all things considered, she is not very important to us compared to the people who are close to us (Marcel 1950, 180). Our degree of availability also varies according to our ability to remain focused on others. If we are unable to pay attention to

someone for more than 20 seconds, for example, we will be less available than if we are able to remain focused on that person for longer periods of time. It is more difficult to feel close and connected to someone if we keep thinking about other things or other people.

What seems very important for Marcel about availability is that when we are available, we see others as persons, and when unavailable as objects (Marcel 1998, 235). When we are unavailable to someone, we have towards her the attitude that we typically hold towards objects (Marcel 1997, 223 v.l). Objects are at our disposal and we can use them to come to our ends. Our interest in them is purely instrumental. Hence, when we are interested in someone only for instrumental reasons, we treat them as objects. We forget that they are free beings rather than things that we can use. For example, when we ask someone for our way, we are not interested in that person for herself, we merely want directions. Marcel says that this person is like a speaking signpost to us (Marcel 1950, 179 v.l). Very often, also, we see in others nothing more than the function we need them to fulfil. When we are buying our train ticket at the desk, we are not interested in the person in front of us for herself. We are only interested in getting a ticket and we only see her as a ticket provider. We don't think about what she is experiencing or thinking. We only expect her to sell us the ticket. In those cases, we treat the other person as "as a sort of apparatus which [we] can, or think [we] can, manipulate, or of which [we] can dispose at will," (Marcel 1951a, 17) instead of seeing her as a free being (Marcel 1949, 107). Hence, when we are using people to get to our ends and are interested in them only because of what we can gain, we use them like if they were objects.

There are subtler ways of treating others as objects. Sometimes, we address others in a more or less conscious attempt to get recognition, approval or praise, as when we are falsely modest in order to be complimented (Marcel 1951a, 14). When we do so, we are not interested in others for themselves. Others are a means towards recognition, approval, praise or whatever we desire for ourselves. Marcel says that in those cases, others are playing the role of a resonator, or an amplifier (Marcel 1951a, 14). The shy young man going to a party for the first time is using others as a mirror. He pays great attention to them, but only to read on their faces what they think of him (Marcel 1950, 176). He is looking for a reflection of himself. It seems thus that for Marcel, whenever we pay attention to another person for another reason than because we are interested in her for her own sake, we are in an instrumental relationship with her and we see her and treat her as an object.

We also relate to others as objects when we try to understand them and explain their behaviour in purely causal terms (e.g. neurological functioning, genetics or environmental determinants), as we explain the trajectory of an object with the forces that apply to it.

If I consider the other person as a sort of mechanism exterior to my own ego, a mechanism of which I must discover the spring or manner of working... I shall never succeed in obtaining anything but a

completely exterior knowledge of him, which is in a way the very denial of his real being. (Marcel 1951a, 23)

Objects that are purely physical are causally determined and we can supposedly figure them out completely, understand how they are structured, and how they work. Subjects, by oppositions are free and hence escape a causal or mechanistic understanding. Any account of a subject in terms of causes and environmental factors will leave out something crucial: the fact that the subject is free and can determine itself. We cannot understand someone from our own point of view without leaving out this core aspect of her, because we try to understand her from the outside. For Marcel, this implies that a subject can never be grasped; it can only be “welcomed” (*accueilli*) (Marcel 1950, 208). It is, however, not clear whether this implies that we cannot know anything about others or if Marcel only meant to say that we cannot judge or categorise others without seeing them as objects.

To sum up, we see others as objects when our interest in them is instrumental, when we use them to come to our ends, and when we try to understand and grasp them as if they were purely causally determined. By contrast, we see others and treat them as persons when we are interested in them for their own sake and see that they are free autonomous beings existing beyond our boundaries. This gives us an idea of why Marcel thinks that the one who is available sees others as persons, but it does not seem sufficient. When we are not available to someone, we do not start thinking that she is a thing with no mental life and without freedom. It seems too strong to say that we see her as an object. Although the person to whom we ask our way plays the role of a signpost to us, we do not think of her as a signpost, but as a person. On the other side, being interested in someone for her own sake cannot be sufficient to see her as a person, as we can be interested in a work of art for itself without seeing it as a person. Marcel could answer that we need to be interested in someone for herself and, in addition, to see that she is a free autonomous being. But it is not clear that this is how we see others when we are available. Marcel’s claim that we see others as others only when available needs further explanation. This question will be addressed in [chapter 5](#).

For Marcel, when we see others as objects, we do not only feel disconnected from them and fail to see them as persons, but we also treat ourselves as objects. When I am unavailable, “my interlocutor is not being treated as a being; [she] is not even, in fact, an other, because I myself do not operate as a being, as someone real, in this fictive and lifeless relationship” (Marcel 1967, 108). Why Marcel thinks this is the case is not entirely clear. It seems that for him, when we are unavailable, we are not ourselves. Ego-centrism distorts us and changes us into a being that is not able to communicate and connect with others, and thus in some sense, it changes us into an object (Marcel 1967, 55). How we are different when available or unavailable is not entirely clear and would also need to be explored further. This will not be addressed in this dissertation, though, as we will focus on interpersonal aspects of availability.

Concerning the type of attitude that availability is, Marcel says that it does not respond to the will. Availability is not a technique or a skill that we can master. We could not teach someone how to be available (Marcel 1950, 206). Marcel says that in this respect, availability is like charm. We cannot be charming voluntarily, or on demand: “In fact there is a kind of willing – the willing that implies constraint – which basically excludes the very notion of charm” (Marcel 1950, 206). Availability, like charm, is something we cannot force ourselves into. When we are too ego-centred, we cannot become available, even if we really want to. Putting ourselves in the other person’s shoes can help, but it is not sufficient to make us available. Marcel does, however, not say how we become available, what the causes of or the factors facilitating availability are. This also opens the question of what kind of thing availability is. Is it a mental state, a disposition, a character trait, or perhaps a complex attitude?

Before closing this section, we need to ask why Marcel thinks availability is important. He thinks availability matters because, first, it enables us to see others, but also ourselves, as we are, with our just place in the world. According to Marcel, when unavailable, we are under the illusion of “moral egocentricity” (Marcel 1951a, 19). We see ourselves as the centre of her world. Everything and everybody exist for us, are seen from our perspective and are subjected to our desires and aims. We take ourselves as the unique reference centre. For example, we think someone is “too slow” or “too fast” according to the speed we want the other person to have (Marcel 2001, 123). But when we become available, it changes. We come to realise that the other person is another “centre” of the world, just like us (Marcel 1997, 58 II). She starts to see that the other person’s experiences are just as real as ours and that we are a “fellow creature” (Marcel 1997, 20 II). We see that we are just “one among many” (Marcel 1997, 20 vol. II). In conclusion, availability is important because it enables us to discover that there are other subjects just like us in the world.

The second reason why availability matters is that the experience of reciprocal availability is intense and life changing. If the one we are available to reciprocates and becomes available as well, then something special happens. Marcel says that there is a “communion” between the two of us (Marcel 1999, 53) and that a “concrete we” is created (Marcel 1964, 95). We remain two distinct beings, but our availability brings us closer to each other and creates a sort of unity between us (Marcel 1999, 53). We participate in the same reality and are *with* each other. In French, unlike in English, material objects cannot be with each other. Only conscious beings can be with each other because it suggests that there is a relationship between them. This is what is central for Marcel. While objects are indifferent to each other, subjects are affected by each other’s presence. It makes a difference to them to be close to others and they take them into account. When two beings are available to each other, they feel that there is a “togetherness”; they are connected in a deep way that could never happen with material things (Marcel 1997, 2 II). This experience is positive. It feels good

to be connected to others in that way. Marcel says that when the other person and we are both available to each other, her “presence does really make itself felt, it can refresh [our] inner being; it reveals [us] to [ourselves], it makes [us] more fully [ourselves] than [we] should be if [we] were not exposed to its impact” (Marcel 1950, 205). Availability is thus important for us because it enables us to connect with others.

Lastly, availability is important to Marcel because he thinks that we are really ourselves only when available. When we are unavailable to others, we are interested in ourselves mostly. In front of the others, we are very aware of ourselves and of what we want from them. We then adapt our behaviour towards them in order to increase our chances of success. We are not spontaneous. We are not being ourselves but pretending to be one thing or another to get what we want. For example, our being nice to others might not be an expression of our generosity, but of our desire to appear generous. Our complimenting them might not be an expression of our admiration for them, but an attempt to flatter them in order to get what we want. When we are unavailable, we are unauthentic and manipulative. Marcel says that “from the moment that I become preoccupied about the effect I want to produce on the other person, my every act, word and attitude loses its authenticity; and we all know what even a studied or affected [(a pretended)] simplicity can be” (Marcel 1951a, 17). Availability is thus important because it is our only way to be authentic in social contexts.

While this seems obviously true in some cases, it is not clear that it is impossible for us to remain authentic if we are unavailable to others. It seems possible to be unavailable to someone and to care so little about that person that we remain completely indifferent to her presence and thus remain authentic. Marcel’s claim is thus in need of more justification (but this will not be explored in this thesis).

For all these reasons, availability plays an important role in Marcel’s philosophy in general and especially in his theory of intersubjectivity. He thinks that we need availability to discover that others are subjects, but also to become conscious of ourselves. Marcel says that consciousness of oneself is intersubjective (Marcel 1951a, 18). Why he thinks so cannot be considered here, but it is important to see that for Marcel, intersubjectivity, and thus availability, are at the core of our beings and, as a result, are the cornerstone of his ontology and metaphysics (Marcel 1997, 12; 171 II). Marcel wanted the long western tradition that saw the self as an entity that exists by itself and that is isolated from others to end. For him, human beings are fundamentally relational, and they relate with each other through availability.

In conclusion, Marcel thought that most of the time we are self-interested, and this prevents us from paying attention to others and from being interested in them for their own sake. Availability is necessary to see others as subjects, that is, as free beings who exist by themselves. Then, we can be in a relationship with others and feel connected to them and be ourselves.

Although Marcel was perhaps the last author to refer to this attitude with the word “availability”, he was not the only one to describe it and stress its importance for interactions with others. In the following section, I will outline the different aspects of this attitude that have been put forward by other authors in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **1.2 Other Accounts of Availability**

Several other authors have also described availability. To advance in our project of understanding what it is, it will be useful to see how they understand availability and what they take to be constitutive features of it. I will not present individually each of their accounts of availability, because, first, to understand each author’s account of availability completely, we would need to describe the theoretical framework in which those accounts are embedded. This would be too long and ultimately not useful to our purpose of understanding what availability is. Second, the different descriptions of availability are very homogenous, despite their terminological differences. A presentation of each individual description of availability, the one after the other, would thus have been too repetitive. For these reasons, I will rather present their accounts of availability thematically, by describing the different features of availability that have been identified.

### **1.1.1 Authors who Discuss Forms of Availability**

Before doing this, I will present the authors and their reasons for being interested in availability. Let us begin with Martin Buber who described availability in his famous essay, *I and Thou* (Buber 1937). Buber contrasted two fundamental ways of relating to the world, one instrumental, the “I-it” relationship, and one dialogical, the “I-thou” relationship. The “I-thou” relationship seems to be what we have been calling availability. Buber was interested in the “I-thou” relationship because, according to him, it is necessary to human beings and we cannot live without it (Buber 1937, 34). However, Buber gave little description of what it is to be in the “I-thou” relationship. He was mostly interested in the opposition between the “I-thou” and the “I-it” relationships and the consequences it has on the self and its way of relating to the world. Although Buber refers to this way of relating to the world in other works, I will consider only *I and Thou* here because it is the most important one.

Simone Weil also described availability in *Waiting for God* and *Gravity and Grace* (Weil 2002; 1959). She called it “attention” and was interested in it because of its relation to truth, love, and God. Weil thought that genuine attention – opposite to the muscular contortion that is achieved through will – enables one to see the world as it is, free from illusions, and thus to see others as our neighbours and to love them. Attention is also necessary to relate to God, because prayer consists in love and attention (Weil 2002, 117). For Weil, attention matters

because of what it enables and leads to. She provided, however, no systematic description of attention and her thoughts about attention are disseminated through *Waiting for God and Gravity and Grace*. There is, all in all, only a small collection of remarks on attention to work with.

Simone Weil inspired Iris Murdoch who also stressed the importance of this attitude in her collection of essays *The Sovereignty of the Good* (Murdoch 1971). Calling it attention, Weil's interest in it stemmed from the role it plays, according to her, in morality. Attention is a virtue which is necessary to the moral agent because it enables her to see what is good and just. Attention was thus a central concept for Murdoch. However, like the Buber and Weil, she gave very little description of what this attention is and focused mostly on what attention does. We can find only a few passages where she describes attention.

Buber, Weil, and Murdoch, along with Marcel are considered references when it comes to descriptions of availability. Their works have had strong influences on following, more recent, descriptions of availability, and this is why it is important to consider them, even if their descriptions remain succinct.

Among the more recent descriptions of availability, we can mention Susan Wolf, who undertook to clarify Murdoch's concept of attention in her paper "Loving Attention: Lessons in love from the Philadelphia Story" (Wolf 2014). In order to distinguish it from the broader concept of attention, Wolf called this attitude "loving attention". In that paper, Wolf attempted to understand what loving attention is and how it is related to love. However, it does not seem that loving attention plays an important role in her work, except to the extent that it is related to love, which has been one of her main objects of research. On the contrary to Weil and Murdoch, she dedicated an entire paper to the understanding of loving attention and tried to provide a more detailed analysis of it. However, Wolf focuses mostly on love and on its connection to loving attention. There are still two sections that are dedicated only to loving attention and those will be of special interest to us.

Nel Noddings also described the attitude of availability. She called this attitude "attention" or "engrossment" (14). She became interested in it because, according to her, it is a component of caring, which has been a major focus of her work. Availability is important for her since it is necessary for a caring relationship to develop, but it plays a subsidiary role. I will focus on her book *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy* (Noddings 2002), because she tries to describe "attention" precisely in the first chapter, as part of her "basic phenomenological analysis of caring" (Noddings 2002, 11). To describe it, she drew from Buber, Marcel and Weil, and as a result her account is very much in line with theirs. It is, however, interesting to consider Noddings in order to give an example of how availability has been described in the field of ethics of care (see also, for example Tronto 1993; Gendron 2016).

Marilyn Frye is another philosopher who described an attitude close to availability in her paper "In and Out of Harm's Way". She called this attitude the "loving eye" (Frye 1983, 72) which she contrasted with the "arrogant eye" (Frye 1983, 66). The importance of the loving eye lies for Frye in the fact that the attitude of the loving eye enables us to see others, and most importantly, women, as independent. According to her, the prevailing attitude, especially among men, is the arrogant eye which enslaves women and disempowers them. Availability is important to her because it is the attitude that would free women from their enslavement. However, she does not seem to discuss the distinction between the arrogant and the loving eye elsewhere in her work. As a result, there are only two sections where she describes the arrogant and the loving eye. It seems, however, important to consider Frye because her approach to availability is different from the ones of Weil, Murdoch, Wolf, and Noddings. Unlike them, she is not interested in the connection between availability and prayer, morality, love or care, but as a way to relate to the world and to others. In that regard, she is closer to Buber, although her feminist perspective is very different from his.

Wolf, Noddings, and Frye's descriptions of availability have been chosen for two reasons. First, a practical one, those descriptions have been easier to find than many others that are hidden under other names in books we can find only by chance. Second, they are representative of how availability has been described in different research contexts such as the study of love, the ethics of care, and feminism.

Availability has also been a topic of interest not only for philosophers, but also for psychotherapists. Although our interest is mainly philosophical, psychotherapy theory is an important source of descriptions that we cannot ignore. The attitude of availability is at the centre of one of the major types of psychotherapy: client- or person-centred therapy. According to person-centred psychotherapists, the success of the therapy depends mostly on the relationship between the therapist and the patient, and the best way to have a good patient-therapist relationship is for the therapist to be available to her patient. Psychotherapists' description of availability can be very informative on what availability is.

This is the case of the descriptions of Carl Rogers, the father of person-centred therapy. There is no specific name that Rogers used to refer to the attitude of availability. He called it the "attitude" of the therapists, or "empathy" (Rogers 1961, 84). Availability played a very important role for Rogers and he spent his life arguing and showing that what is most important for the success of a therapy, even more than the therapist's degrees and education, is her ability to hold that attitude towards her patient. Rogers described availability in his writings, especially in his book *On Becoming a Person* (Rogers 1961), in which there is a substantial number of pages dedicated to availability. Many of those pages are used for the description of what the patient should perceive from the therapist and how this helps the patient. But he still

provides us with longer and more detailed descriptions of availability than many of the philosophers presented above.

Finally, Scott Peck also described availability in his book *The Road Less Traveled and Beyond* (Peck 1997). He called it “listening”. He was interested in it because it is, according to him, necessary to communicate well with others. In the first chapter of his book “Crusade Against Simplism”, he decries simplistic thinking and explains the disastrous effects it has on society. One of them is that we are not able to listen to others. We are full of assumptions and illusions that prevent us from understanding others and communicating successfully with them (Peck 1997, 49). While he agreed with Rogers that availability is very beneficial for psychotherapy patients, listening does not seem to be a major concern of his and he spoke about it in only two pages. However, his description of listening has been included here because it is very dense and many of the central components of availability identified by the other authors are mentioned. Also, even if Peck is a psychiatrist, his book is addressed to a much wider audience and it is a good example of how availability is presented in non-academic writing and how it can be nevertheless useful for a philosophical description of availability. There is no doubt that there are many more descriptions of availability. But the authors presented here are the most important ones and offer a representative view of what has been said on the topic.

### **1.1.2 Description of the identified features of availability**

We will now turn to the description of the different characteristics of availability that have been identified by the authors presented above. As said before, their descriptions of availability are very homogenous. They all describe the same features of availability, or very close ones. I have selected the ones that were claimed to be central to availability and some other ones that are less central but that have been pointed out by several authors. I then regrouped the ones that were very close under the same headings, which are sometimes different from the authors’ terminology, and described each of them separately. There are, however, some overlap and similarities between some of the components, because sometimes authors stressed different aspects of the components of availability that are very close.

The authors presented here have not discussed the status of the different features of availability that they identified and have not prioritised them. I have made a classification because I believe it will help us understand what the core of the concept of availability is. First, I will present the components classified as low-level, as they are the most basic, and distinguish between the ones that are mainly cognitive and the ones that are rather affective or conative. Then, I will expose the high-level components, which seem to emerge from the low-level ones. I will then describe aspects of availability that follow from the low – and high-

level components and that can be seen as consequences of availability. Lastly, I will mention two features of availability that inform us on the type of attitude that availability is rather than on its content, phenomenology or expression. You can find below a table giving an overview of the different features of availability and of the authors that mention them. This table also gives an overview of each author's account of availability, which the reader will not find in this section, since the account is thematic.

It should also be noted that this section intends to draw the picture of how the authors presented above understand availability. This means that I will only describe what they said and will not try to clarify imprecisions or solve tensions that there might be in their accounts, although I will point to them. For the sake of clarity, I will always call the attitude described here as "availability" even though the authors used other names. Even if authors often have slightly (or sometimes completely) different conceptions of each feature of availability, I will try to make a hypothesis on how each component can be understood at the end of each section. I will also offer an example to help the reader understand each of those features. This shall help us understand what availability is and to provide a more precise definition, which will be the object of [chapter 2](#).

		Aspect of availability/Authors	Marcel	Buber	Frye	Murdoch	Noddings	Peck	Rogers	Weil	Wolf
Low-level components	Cognitive components	Attention	Blue	White	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	White	Blue	Blue
		Selflessness	Blue	White	Orange	Blue	White	Blue	Grey	White	Blue
		Disinterested	Blue	Blue	Orange	Grey	Grey	Blue	Grey	White	Blue
		Seeing through the eyes of another	Blue	White	Orange	White	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue
	Affective components	Sympathy	Blue	White	White	Blue	Blue	Grey	White	Blue	White
		Motivated by love/care	Blue	White	White	Blue	Grey	Blue	Blue	Grey	Blue
Higher-level components		Acceptance	Blue	Blue	White	White	White	Blue	Blue	White	White
		Non-interference	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	White	White	Blue	Blue	White
Consequences		see another as a subject	Blue	Blue	White	Blue	White	White	Blue	White	White
		Seeing justly	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	White	White	White	Blue	Blue
		Receptive attitude	Blue	White	White	White	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	White
Other aspects		Availability and the will	Blue	White	Orange	Blue	White	Orange	White	Blue	White
		Availability as a moment	White	Blue	White	White	Blue	White	White	White	White
Number of elements mentioned			11	6	3	8	5	6	7	9	6
			<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; padding: 0;"> <div style="width: 20%; background-color: #4a86e8; height: 10px; margin-bottom: 2px;"></div> Explicitly mentioned           <div style="width: 20%; background-color: #a6a6a6; height: 10px; margin-bottom: 2px;"></div> Seems implied by the account           <div style="width: 20%; background-color: #e67e22; height: 10px; margin-bottom: 2px;"></div> Explicitly contradicted           <div style="width: 20%; background-color: #f9f9f9; height: 10px; margin-bottom: 2px;"></div> Neither mentioned nor contradicted         </div>								

Table 1. Table displaying which feature of availability was identified as such by which author.

i. **Low-level components of availability**

a) **Cognitive components**

*Attention*

First, when we are available, we are paying attention to the person who is the object of our availability. By attention, I mean the ability to select an object on which to focus on. Thus, when we are available, we select another person as our sole, or at least main, object of focus and leave out other possible objects. As we have seen, Weil, Murdoch, Wolf, and Noddings call availability “attention”. But they do not seem to mean “attention” as described here, but rather a special way of paying attention. As a result, while they do not specify that attention is a feature of availability, except for Noddings (Noddings 2002, 14), it seems implied by the term used for availability. Noddings, Peck and Frye, mention attention without defining it or giving more detail about it. Noddings simply says that when we are available, we “attend” to another person (Noddings 2002, 16). Peck says that availability “requires total concentration upon

another" (Peck 1997, 51), and Frye, that it is "a sort of attention" (Frye 1983, 75). Rogers and Buber do not explicitly mention attention, although what they say about availability shows that attention must be engaged.

Although what these authors say about availability and how they name it suggest that the available being pays attention to some other person, and even, that availability *is* a type of attention, some authors do not mention it and none of them specify what they mean by attention. They rather describe what type of attention is involved in availability by mentioning the components of availability that follow this one. Perhaps those authors thought it was obvious that availability involves or consists in a certain type of attention. But it is not clear what they mean by attention and what role it plays in availability. Is availability a type of attention to the other or is it something different from attention but that requires it?

For now, we will say that we are paying attention to another if we select this person as our sole or main object of focus. Most of us are familiar with this concept which can be illustrated by the two following examples:

Rafael is listening to Roland telling him about his romantic relationship and explaining to him how, despite his love for his partner, he is not sure if he wants to commit to this relationship. As Rafael is listening, he starts thinking about his own romantic relationship and whether he is ready to commit to his partner or not. He is imagining moving in with his partner to see whether it is something he would like or not. As he is thinking about all of this, he suddenly hears: "Rafael, are you listening to me?" Roland's call brings him back to the present moment. Rafael realises that he was not paying attention to him.

Rafael is starting to write his PhD thesis. To get off to a good start, he decides to invite Jesse who has just handed in her dissertation for coffee so as to get good advice from her on how to successfully write a doctoral dissertation. As Jesse is talking, Rafael tries not to miss any bit of the precious information pouring from Jesse's mouth. He is taking notes and even asks Jesse to repeat or to talk a bit more slowly so that he can be sure to "get it all". At that moment, his sole concern is to learn as much as possible from Jesse. He is so focused on her and on their conversation that it is as if nothing else existed at that time. He is paying full attention to her.

### *Selflessness*

What is meant by selflessness here is the fact that we forget about ourselves and our own preoccupations to focus on something else, in this case, someone else. Like Marcel who insists that we cannot be available if we are ego-centred, several authors also point out that the type of attention that availability requires is a "bracketing" of the self (Peck 1997, 51). The idea seems to be that we need to "[focus] [our] total attention on" the other person (Peck 1997, 51) to be available, and we cannot do that if we are preoccupied with ourselves. As Weil says, the

attention of availability “is so full that the ‘I’ disappears” (Weil 2002, 118). To be available is thus to attend “selflessly” (Wolf 2014, 384).

Selflessness is a demanding condition as most of the time, we are concerned about ourselves. Murdoch says that “the direction of attention is, *contrary to nature*, outward, away from self” (Murdoch 1971, 66 my italics). For her, egocentrism is a big obstacle to availability because “so much of human conduct is moved by mechanical energy of an egocentric kind” (Murdoch 1971, 52).

Rogers’s point of view on the matter is slightly different. He acknowledges that when we are available, we are not thinking about ourselves. When we are in this attitude, there is “little self-conscious awareness [...]. The self is, subjectively, in the existential moment. It is not something [we] perceive” (Rogers 1961, 147). Rogers insists, however, that when available, we are aware of the changes that happen in ourselves. “By this I mean that whatever feeling or attitude I am experiencing would be matched by my awareness of that attitude” (Rogers 1961, 50). This is what Rogers calls “congruence” (Rogers 1961, 50) which is a central condition for availability in his account. The words or the behaviour of the other person can have an impact on us and trigger some thoughts or emotional reactions and it is important to be aware of them. Although when we are available, we are focused on the other person and are not thinking about or preoccupied about ourselves, we remain (pre-reflectively) aware of what is happening in ourselves.

Frye, however, disagrees with the other authors. For her, when we are available, we remain very aware of ourselves, of our interests and aims. We are not “selfless” (Frye 1983, 74) when available and there is no “self-denial” (Frye 1983, 75). If we were to lose sight of who we are and what our interests and desires are, it “would seriously incapacitate [us] as [perceivers]” (Frye 1983, 75). When available, we then would not be able to see the other person’s interests and desires as hers and not ours. She would lose herself in that attitude. For Frye, we hold the attitude of availability as whole and legitimate persons. We are as we are and we do not need to make any concession about whom we are to be available to others.

Putting Frye aside, it seems that we can describe this component as such: when we are available, we are selfless in the sense that we are not concerned with ourselves or with any self-related preoccupation. For example

As Rafael is waiting for Jesse to arrive at the café, he starts reading the novel that he has been carrying with him lately. At first, he struggles to enter the story because the noise around him distracts him, but after a while, he forgets about his surroundings and becomes fully immersed in the novel. He is taken in the story and is losing track of time. He does not seem to exist but as a witness of the character’s unfolding drama.

### *Paying attention disinterestedly*

To pay attention to someone disinterestedly means that our motivation to pay attention to that person is not self-regarding. We pay attention to that person for her own sake. This component is pointed out explicitly by Buber, Peck, Weil, and Wolf. Weil, for example, says that when available, we are interested in others for their own sake and that “all other incentives are absent” (Weil 1959, 107). In general, availability is presented as being incompatible with instrumentality. Buber says that “as soon as the relation has been [...] permeated with a means”, we stop being available. The world where “all sorts of aims are pursued, where a man works, negotiates, bears influence, undertakes, concurs, organises, conducts business, officiates, preaches” (Buber 1937, 43), is the world of unavailability. Peck notices the same: “Often, we have a preset agenda in mind and wonder as we listen how we can achieve certain desired results to get the conversation over with as quickly as possible or redirected in ways more satisfactory to us” (Peck 1997, 51). When this happens, we are not available because instead of paying attention to the other person, to what she says, and what she is experiencing, we think about what we are trying to achieve or what we want from her. The available being is rather “interested in [her] for her own sake” (Wolf 2014, 382). As Weil says, the other person is not seen as “a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labelled “unfortunate,” but as a man, exactly like us” that matters and deserves our attention (Weil 1959, 115).

Frye disagrees. While for her it is important that when available, we see others as independent and autonomous beings, she does not think that it follows that it is necessary to pay attention to them disinterestedly. On the contrary, it is very important for her that we retain our interests while being available (Frye 1983, 74). Otherwise, we would not know who we are anymore and would lose ourselves. We would become at the mercy of others, taking only their interests into account and forgetting about our own. According to her, when available, we are not necessarily well-meaning. We recognise that others do not exist for us, but it does not have an impact on our motivation to pay attention to them.

Although Murdoch, Rogers, and Noddings do not explicitly mention that we are interested in others for their own sake when available, this seems implied by other components of availability that they mention, such as caring or loving others and seeing them as subjects (see below).

It seems that most of the authors, except Frye, agree that the available being does not pay attention to others for instrumental reasons, but is interested in them for themselves. The difference between selflessness and paying attention disinterestedly seems to be that while selflessness only states that we are not concerned with ourselves, paying attention disinterestedly specifies that we are interested in others for themselves.

Rafael is not selfless as he is listening to Jesse speak about successful dissertation writing. Rather, although he is fully focused on what Jesse is saying, his attention is motivated by his desire to successfully write his own dissertation. He remains aware of and driven by his preoccupation with his own success. His interest in Jesse is soaked in this further interest for himself. At some point, however, Jesse starts to tell Rafael about the difficulty of her current situation, about the fact that her mother is sick and can move in her apartment only with difficulty. As a result, Jesse is taking turns with her brother to take care of her, buy her groceries, cook for her, clean her apartment, etc., which is taking her a lot of time. Furthermore, she is worried that her mother might not recover and that she might lose her. As Jesse is telling all of this to Rafael, Rafael listens to her. He feels truly sorry for Jesse. His attention is effortlessly directed towards what Jesse is telling him because he cares about it, about Jesse. As he is offering Jesse a compassionate ear, he forgets, for a moment, his concern with himself and with his dissertation.

Authors do not always specify what it is that we try to achieve by paying attention to others. Are we trying to help that person, to understand her, or are we possibly paying attention without trying to achieve anything?

*Seeing through the eyes of another*

According to some authors (Weil, Wolf, Rogers, and Peck), when we are available, we put ourselves in the other person's place and try to see her situation from her perspective. Weil says that we "transport [ourselves] into [the other person] by sympathy" (Weil 1959, 147). In Rogers' words, availability means "to see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, to sense how it feels to him, to achieve his frame of reference in regard to the thing he is talking about" (Rogers 1961, 331-32). The understanding that we have of the other person when available does not depend on our own experiences, preferences and values. We rather understand the other person "on [her] own terms, and not just in relation to [our] wishes and needs" (Wolf 2014, 380). Peck also says that availability requires "the temporary giving up or setting aside of [our] own prejudices, frames of reference, and desires in order to experience as far as possible another's world from the inside, stepping inside his or her shoes" (Peck 1997, 50).

Noddings expresses the same idea, although a bit differently. According to her, we do not completely set aside our point of view but add the other person's point of view to our own: "When I attend in this way I become, in an important sense, a duality. I see through two pairs of eyes, hear with two sets of ears, feel the pain of the other self in addition to my own" (Noddings 2002, 15). Noddings seems to agree with Rogers that when we are available, we do not lose awareness of ourselves. In her view, we do not forget about our point of view, but we add to ours the perspective of the other.

Frye is again the big exception. She claims that when we are available, we do not "see with the other's eye instead of [our] own" (Frye 1983, 74). Frye seems to think that if we try to

put ourselves in the other person's shoes and see through her eyes, we assimilate her to ourselves and we lose the distinction between self and other. This would be a form of appropriation of the other person and, as we will see, it is very important for Frye that the other person's autonomy and distinctness from ourselves be respected.

Weil, Wolf, Noddings, Rogers, and Peck think that when we are available, we try to understand another person. But if we try to understand her from our perspective, our view will be skewed. The other person has a different experience, different character traits, values, culture, etc. As a result, her perspective on and experience of the world are different from ours. If we want to understand another, what she thinks and how she feels, we need to take her perspective and see what it is for her, from her point of view, to be in that situation and have those experiences.

Hence, it seems that this component of availability consists in 1) taking the perspective of the one we are available to and imagine how she sees things and 2) as we are doing this, we try to see the other person's situation from her perspective and take into account who she is, her character traits, her history, etc. We are not trying to form our own opinion on the situation of the other person.

Illustrative example:

As Rafael is listening to Jesse, he tries to understand what it means for Jesse to be in this difficult and painful situation with her mother. He imagines what Jesse is experiencing by imagining having a mother who is sick and needs care. As it happens, Rafael is completely estranged from his mother. When he turned 18, his mother told him that he was now an adult and had to take care of himself. She put him out of the apartment. She moved out of the country a couple of weeks later without telling him and without letting any contact information behind. From that moment, Rafael decided that his mother was dead to him. She had never been a good mother anyway. Always out or passed out drunk at home. But when Rafael is imagining what Jesse is experiencing, he is not thinking about his own mother and what it would be like for him if his mother was sick. Rather, he imagines what it must feel like for Jesse, who has always been very close to her mother, to take care of her sick mother, who herself has been an amazing mother for her children.

It remains to be clarified whether when we are available, we need to put ourselves in the other person's shoes, and, if that is the case, whether the distinction between ourselves and her remains or not. It is also not clear what it means exactly to put ourselves in another person's shoes. Do we simply need to try to understand her or do we need to imagine ourselves in her situation, or imagine being her? We need to specify how this understanding of the other is achieved and whether it requires some simulation. These questions will be addressed in [chapter 5](#).

## **b) Affective Components**

### *Feeling for (sympathy)*

Several authors say that availability involves feeling some kind of emotion for the one we are available to such as sympathy, compassion and empathy. This does not come as a surprise as empathy is often understood as an emotion that arises when we “put ourselves in the other’s shoes”, or, as we just said, when “we see through the eyes of another”. Weil says that “sympathy” (Weil 1959, 147) is part of availability and, after stating that availability is “very rare and difficult” (Weil 1959, 114), she goes on to say: “Warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity are not enough” (Weil 1959, 114). She seems to imply that availability has as a strong affective component. She, however, does not specify what she means by “sympathy” and “warmth of heart”. Murdoch also mentions “compassion” (Murdoch 1971, 66) as being part of availability, also without saying more about it.

Noddings is more precise and rather connects availability with empathy, understood as the ability to feel what another is feeling. She says that “in caring encounters” – and thus, when available – I “feel what he or she [the other person] is feeling even if I am quite sure intellectually that I would not myself feel that way in the given situation” (Noddings 2002, 14). Rogers insists as well that a “sensitive and accurate empathy” is part of availability (Rogers 1961, 265). By empathy, he means “to sense the [other person]’s anger, fear, or confusion as if it were your own, yet without your own anger, fear, or confusion getting bound up in it” (Rogers 1961, 284). When available, we understand “how it feels and seems to be” for the other person without losing touch with the fact that we are not her (Rogers 1961, 62).

Lastly, Peck does not explicitly mention empathy or compassion, although his “unification” (Peck 1997, 50) of the self and of the other person could be understood in terms of empathy and of sharing what she is experiencing, “extending oneself” (Peck 1997, 50) to her.

Thus, for Weil, Murdoch, Noddings, and Rogers, being available to another involves or implies an other-oriented emotional response. This emotional involvement takes the form of affective empathy (feeling what another person is feeling) or sympathy (feeling of concern for another person) (see [chapter 3](#)).

Illustrative example:

As Rafael is listening to Jesse telling him about her mother, he sees how concerned and sad Jesse is. As he tries to imagine what it must be like for Jesse to be in that situation, he imagines having his own loved and loving mother sick, and perhaps dying. He feels his throat clench and a burst of sadness submerging him. He knows that this sadness is the one Jesse is feeling right now and every day. Leaving this imagining behind, he looks at her distressed friend and feels very sorry for her. He starts thinking whether there is something he could do to help her or cheer her up.

Unlike Noddings and Rogers, Murdoch and Weil do not specify what they mean by sympathy and compassion. This is problematic because those concepts have been understood in different ways and can refer to different emotional attitudes. We do not know if they think that the available one feels what the other person is feeling, feels an emotion out of concern for the other, a wish for her to be better, or even pity, and some condescending righteousness. Those types of feelings have different phenomenological characteristics, expressions, and functions and it seems important to know if there is one or many that is part of availability or related to it. In the [next chapter](#), we will study in more detail the emotional component of availability. In [chapter 3](#), we will also define more clearly empathy, sympathy and compassion, and explain how they are distinct from availability and how they are related to it. The connection between availability and those feelings is further explored in [chapter 4](#).

#### *Motivated by love and care*

In most accounts, an important aspect of availability is that it is motivated by care or love for the object of availability. We have already seen that the authors presented here think that availability towards another is a demanding attitude that requires a genuine interest in that person. Peck thinks that this is possible only if we love her “in the broadest sense of the word” (Peck 1997, 51): “The energy required for the discipline of bracketing and the focusing of total attention on another is so great that it can be accomplished only by love, which I define as the will to extend oneself for mutual growth” (Peck 1997, 51). Peck explains that when we are available and set ourselves aside to enter someone else’s frame of reference, there is a “unification” of the self and of the other person (Peck 1997, 51) which leads to “an extension and enlargement of ourselves and new knowledge is always gained from it” (Peck 1997, 51). Both the one we are available to and ourselves benefit from our attitude and grow in the process. We begin “to understand each other better. True communication is under way and the duet dance of love has begun” (Peck 1997, 51). Peck seems to think that love is an important part of availability. But it is not clear what he means by love and what role it plays. It seems to motivate availability but also to naturally arise when we are available.

Murdoch claims too that “the ability to so direct attention is love” (Murdoch 1971, 66), without explaining why. Wolf assumes that Murdoch has the same reason as Peck to connect availability to love: “One needs to be motivated to make the effort to see an object clearly, to combat or silence one’s more natural tendency to see it through a distorting lens of self-interest. The motivation to see an object in this way is supplied by love” (Wolf 2014, 380). Wolf agrees that when we love someone, we care about her and are interested in her for her own sake, which can motivate us to be available. But according to her, what motivates us is the fact that we are interested in the other person for her own sake and love is relevant only because of its connection to it: “One can find an object intrinsically interesting without necessarily liking it or loving it, at least not in the way in which we like and love those who are special to us, and

whose good or ill is especially tied up with our own” (Wolf 2014, 383). For example, we can love humanity and be interested in each and every one without actually loving or liking everyone (Wolf 2014, 384). “One need not, on this view, love those who are “enemies of the people,” who are callous and cruel. One need not, for example, love Idi Amin” (Wolf 2014, 384). However, the one who is available to another “will be more likely to love [her], or at least to feel kindly disposed toward [her], to sympathise with [her], to forgive [her] than will most of us, who see other people through lenses distorted by the needs and wishes of our fearful, insecure, and greedy selves” (Wolf 2014, 384). Hence, for Wolf, interest, not love, motivates availability.

For Rogers, there is also such a feeling that motivates availability, but it is not love, or at least not as we usually understand it: “[this] attitude, at its best, is devoid of the quid pro quo aspect of most of the experiences we call love. It is the simple outgoing human feeling of one individual for another, a feeling, it seems to me which is even more basic than sexual or parental feeling” (Rogers 1961, 84). It is a form of “caring” (Rogers 1961, 84) where we “prize” another, think she has value and want her to do well and grow (Rogers 1961, 62). Like with Peck, it is not completely clear what the feeling that motivates availability is.

Weil has a different point of view on the connection between availability and love. For her, love does not motivate availability; availability *is* love. Availability, attention to the other, is “the substance” of “the love of our neighbour”, just as it is the “substance” of “love of God”, as they are “the same love” (Weil 1959, 114). What motivates availability is rather “to know that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do” (Weil 2002, 119). Weil says that this knowledge, or awareness motivates us to be available: “that is enough, the rest follows of itself” (Weil 2002, 119). What motivates availability thus seems to be a form of concern, or at least an interest in another for herself. Understood in that way, Weil’s position is not so different from the ones of the other authors. Availability is motivated by a form of interest in or care for the other and because of this dimension, availability can be seen as a form of love, understood as agape. What the affective dimension of availability is, is however still unclear.

Noddings’s view on the motivation for availability is also a bit different from the ones of the other authors. Recall that she describes availability because she thinks it is a component of care, of which she is offering a phenomenological analysis. This implies that in her view, care (or love) cannot motivate availability. Rather, availability is connected to care in the following way: Noddings says that if in addition to being available, we are also “sympathetic to [the other]’s plight”, then “motivational displacement follows” (Noddings 2002, 17). What she calls *motivational displacement* is the fact that our “motive energy begins to flow toward [the other person] and [her] projects” (Noddings 2002, 17). This seems to mean that we want that person’s good and are motivated to act for it. Our motivation for action is directed towards her wellbeing. When there is availability and motivational displacement, then, we care about the

other person (Noddings 2002, 19)<sup>3</sup>. Availability is thus connected to care, but it does not motivate it. Rather, it partly constitutes it.

Lastly, there is some tension between Weil and Murdoch on the question whether the love involved in availability is a personal or an impersonal one. If it is impersonal then the feeling of love is directed at a group of people or at an idea in general. It is then expressed to an individual only because she is part of that group or represents the idea loved. The individual is interchangeable with any other and she is not loved for her own sake. It is the group or the idea which is loved through her. If the love is personal, however, then the individual is loved for herself and she is not replaceable. Murdoch's position is clear, for her, "the highest love is in some sense impersonal" (Murdoch 1971, 75) and so is the love involved in availability. Weil's position, however, is ambiguous. On the one hand, she says that "the love of our neighbour, [which is present in availability,] the love of the beauty of the world, and the love of religion are in a sense quite impersonal loves" (Weil 1959, 199). On the other hand, when speaking about availability towards the afflicted, she says that "we have to bring to them in their inert, anonymous condition a personal love" (Weil 1959, 150). It is thus not clear if for Weil, availability requires personal or impersonal love. For Wolf, however, the impersonal love that we can hold towards humanity is sufficient for availability as long as it makes us interested in the other person. Availability does not require personal love, but personal interest.

Most authors agree that availability is motivated by a form of caring for the other person or a form of love, conceived as a general, rather than romantic, form of love. The example of Rafael and Jesse as developed above in the component "paying attention disinterestedly" is also illustrative here:

As Jesse is telling all of this to Rafael, Rafael listens to her. He feels truly sorry for Jesse. **His attention is effortlessly directed towards what Jesse is telling him because he cares about that, about Jesse.** As he is offering Jesse a compassionate ear, he forgets, for a moment, his concern with himself and with his dissertation. For a moment, he is not preoccupied with himself, but only cares about Jesse and her difficult situation.

It is because Rafael cares about Jesse that he is interested in what happens to her.

However, most of the authors above do not say what they mean by love or care, or at least not in clear terms. This shows, just like in the last section, that we need to clarify what the affective engagement of the available being towards the other is and what role it plays.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that for Noddings this is however not sufficient to have a caring relation. To have a caring relation, in addition to being available and having motivational displacement, the carer needs to act on that motivation and the cared-for needs to recognise that he is being cared for by the carer (Noddings 2002, 19).

## ii. Higher-Level Components

### *Acceptance*

Several authors mention that when we are available to another, we “accept” her as she is. What accepting another means, however, is far from clear. It seems to mean that we do not blame her or criticise her. Fortunately, Rogers describes in more details acceptance which is, according to him, central to availability (Rogers 1961, 174). For him, the first aspect of acceptance is that there is no evaluation of the other person. When we accept another, we understand her, what she is saying and experiencing, and take notice that this is how she is without evaluating her (Rogers 1961, 331). Evaluations, positive and negative alike, put us in a position of disapproval, or potential disapproval, of the other. When we evaluate another’s feeling, attitude or behaviour negatively, we imply that we would like this person to be different. We do not accept her as she is. When we evaluate her positively, we seem to accept her, but it is a conditional acceptance on her being a certain way that we approve of, and thus suggests that disapproval is potentially pending. For Rogers, real acceptance can only be total and unconditional (Rogers 1961, 62). We acknowledge that the other person is as she is and do not approve or disapprove of her, no matter what.

Second, we must also “prize” (Rogers 1961, 62) the other person and think that she has value – again, no matter what she says, does, or thinks. Rogers writes “By acceptance I mean a warm regard for [the other] as a person of unconditional self-worth – of value no matter what [her] condition, [her] behaviour, or [her] feelings” (Rogers 1961, 34). This “outgoing positive feeling without reservations, without evaluations” has been called “unconditional positive regard” (Rogers 1961, 62).

However, accepting someone does not imply that we need to approve everything of her. We can prize her as a whole without approving of everything she says, does or thinks, because she is not identified with those. In fact, the first condition of acceptance requires us to refrain from making particular evaluations of the other. Thus, the one who accepts another as she is, prizes her but does not approve nor disapprove any particular fact about the other (at least during availability).

Acceptance is also mentioned by Buber and Peck as being part of what being available is, but they say very little about it. Buber writes at several places that being available – being in the I-Thou relation – requires us to “accept [another] as [she] is” (Buber 1937, 40 see also p.15 and 111). But he does not say what he means by acceptance. Peck asserts as well that availability “involves a temporary total acceptance of the other” without further explanation (Peck 1997, 51). Since Buber and Peck do not specify what they mean by acceptance, we can only assume that they intend something similar to Rogers.

We will thus understand the component of acceptance as being non-judgemental towards another.

Illustrative example:

Rafael is listening to Jesse, telling him about the difficult situation with her mother. Rafael sees that this situation is difficult for her and that her mother's sickness makes her sad. Surprisingly, Jesse also tells Rafael that although she is deeply concerned by what is happening to her mother, she does not want to keep helping her so much and would like her mother to enter an institution. Her career is very important to her and if she wants to make it, she has to be fully focused on that. This situation saddens her, but she does not want to give up her career or risk to fail because her mother is sick. It is her life and she wants to live it for herself. Rafael is surprised to learn that. He thought Jesse would be the kind of daughter who would do anything for their parent. However, he knows that those situations are extremely difficult and that we all cope as well as we can. He does not think less of Jesse, nor disapprove of her wish to focus on her career rather than on her sick mother. He tells her: "I get it. I am really sorry that you find yourself in this difficult situation."

Interestingly, the prizing of the recipient of availability mentioned by Rogers seems to be close or related to the care or love that motivates availability. It also seems likely that this prizing is the base or the motivation for acceptance, or no-judgementalism. Because we care about another or prize her, we accept her as she is and refrain from judging and categorising her. If that is the case, then acceptance is an outcome of the caring or prizing involved in availability. Rogers' description of acceptance leaves yet other questions unanswered. For example, isn't the prizing a form of evaluation or judgement? If this is so, how can we conciliate this with the first aspect of acceptance which consists in refraining from evaluating the other? If it is not an evaluation, what is it then?

*Respect for autonomy (non-interference)*

Several authors point out that when we are available to another, we recognise that she is an autonomous being and we respect that. We do not interfere with her plan to achieve her own agenda and do not try to subdue her to our own desires and goals. Buber seems to refer to this non-interference in terms of appropriation: "Where there is self-appropriation there is no reality. The more direct the contact with the *Thou*, the fuller is the sharing" (Buber 1937, 63). The relationship with the object of availability is not one of appropriation, where we make her ours and subjected to our will. This relationship is rather one of sharing where we communicate while each remaining on our own ground.

For Weil, the other person's freedom and ability to freely consent, or not, is something that when available we "wish[es] to preserve in [her]" (Weil 1959, 153). The point of availability is not to "extend [our] own power" onto her (Weil 1959, 147). Rather, we "desire the existence of the other" (Weil 1959, 147) just as she is, free and independent from ourselves. The effort

involved in availability is thus a sort of “renunciation”: “The man accepts to be diminished by concentrating on an expenditure of energy, which will not extend his own power but will only give existence to a being other than himself, who will exist independently of him” (Weil 1959, 147). Availability requires us to be aware that the other person is an independent being and to respect and value it.

Murdoch insists quite explicitly on the fact that the attitude of availability is not one of appropriation: the object of availability is “looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self” (Murdoch 1971, 65). When available, we see how the other person is different and separated from the self and accept it. In fact, for Murdoch, this awareness motivates us to be available to the other: “The more the separateness and differentness of other people is realised, and the fact seen that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one’s own, the harder it becomes to treat a person as a thing” (Murdoch 1971, 66). The realisation that another is a (human) being just like us, but distinct and separated from us, makes it hard for us not to take her and her own will seriously.

The same ideas come out of Roger’s writing. He first notices that we find it difficult to let people be different from us: “We find it very hard to permit our children or our parents or our spouses to feel differently than we do about particular issues or problems. We cannot permit our clients or our students to differ from us or to utilise their experience in their own individual ways” (Rogers 1961, 21). This leads us to interfere with them and try to make them change their opinions, decisions, habits, etc. But availability is the opposite. When we are available, we want another to be just as she is and to find her own way herself, because it will be the one right for her. The attitude of availability is thus “a caring enough about the person that you do not wish to interfere with [her] development, nor to use [her] for any self-aggrandising goals of your own. Your satisfaction comes in having set [her] free to grow in [her] own fashion” (Rogers 1961, 84). The awareness that another is “a separate individual” (Rogers 1961, 38) is absolutely central to availability in order to avoid trespassing onto her individuality. Lastly, like Murdoch, Rogers observes that the double observation that someone is an individual distinct from us, but similar to us, can motivate availability: “There is ... a profound experience of the underlying commonality – should we say brotherhood – of man. As a result [the therapist] feels toward the client a warm, positive, affectional reaction,” which is the positive regard we mentioned earlier as a component of availability for Rogers (Rogers 1961, 82).

For Frye, respect of the independence of the one we are available to is also central to availability. The one who is unavailable, or in Frye’s words “the arrogant eye” appropriates another and thinks she exists for her (Frye 1983, 69). Her “perception is arrogating” (Frye 1983, 69). She does not even consider the possibility that the other person is in fact “independent, indifferent” (Frye 1983, 67). From the perspective of the unavailable being, “everything is either “for [her]” or “against [her]” (Frye 1983, 67). By contrast, the available

being, or the loving eye, is able to see that the other person is different and independent from her and to respect that (Frye 1983, 75). She “does not make the object of perception into something edible, does not try to assimilate it, does not reduce it to the size of the seer’s desire, fear and imagination, and hence, does not have to simplify” (Frye 1983, 76). Instead of appropriating the other person, she sees and respects the fact that she is independent from her and not at her service.

The different accounts of this point are quite homogenous. They all point out to the fact that when available to someone, we see her as a distinct being with her own will and we respect her as such and do not try to assimilate her and make her ours. As a result, we do not interfere with her and do not try to impose anything on her. As Rogers points out, it is possible that non-interference is an outcome of the prizing or caring for the other person. Because we care about that person, we want to respect her autonomy and refrain from interfering with her actions (or thoughts).

Illustrative example:

As Rafael hears about Jesse’s desire to focus on her career rather than on helping her sick mother, he feels something tensing up within himself. Family is so important! Especially as Jesse’s mother has been so good and dedicated to her. Now that she is sick, shouldn’t Jesse give back? How can she think about developing her career rather than on spending time with her mother who might soon die and on helping her? As these thoughts shoot in burst in his head, he realises that he is judging Jesse. He takes a big breath and reminds himself that we never truly know what is happening inside someone else’s head and that we all have different coping mechanism. Perhaps Jesse cannot stand the sight of her mother as sick and diminished and it makes her think about how hard it is going to be to lose her. Rafael also realises that if he were in Jesse’s place, he would hate it if someone came and offered unrequired advice. He often finds himself thinking that he knows what is best for him and expects support from others, not judgement and criticism. As a result, he decides to offer that to Jesse. Instead of telling her what he thinks she should do, he accepts that her point of view is different and let it be so. He trusts that she will do what is best for her and her mother.

What these authors do not explain is how or why when we are available, we come to see another as an autonomous being and are motivated to respect that. It seems connected to the other components, to the fact that we are not paying attention to her for instrumental reasons but for her own sake, and that we love or care about her. But the link between those is not clear. Moreover, caring about someone can rather motivate us not to respect her autonomy if we think she puts herself in danger, for example. Hence, the role that this feature plays in availability needs to be further explored.

### iii. Consequences of low – and higher-level components

#### *Seeing another as a subject*

The idea that we see another as a subject – a free conscious being – by contrast to objects, only when available has already come forth at several times above. This aspect of availability, which is fundamental for Marcel, also appears in the writings of Buber, Murdoch, and Rogers. For Buber, when we are not available to someone, we are in an “I-it” relationship with her and she “becomes an object among objects” (Buber 1937, 17). We do not see her as a person we are in a relationship with, but as a thing “fixed in its size and its limits” (Buber 1937, 17), “a specific point in space and time within the net of the world; ... a nature able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities” (Buber 1937, 8). In addition, for Buber like for Marcel, when we are unavailable, the other person is an object for us, but we are also, ourselves, an object (Buber 1937, 68).

Murdoch also suggests that when we are not available we see the other person as an object when she says that “the more the separateness and differentness of other people is realised, and the fact seen that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one’s own, the harder it becomes to treat a person as a thing” (Murdoch 1971, 66). The more we are available and look at the other person with a loving and attentive eye, the less we are able to see her as an object, or a thing, and to treat her as such.

For Rogers too, when we are available, we see the other as a subject, rather than as an object. This has special practical importance for him as it will have an impact on the way this person sees herself and act: “If... I see a relationship as an opportunity to “reinforce” all that he [the other] is, the person that he is with all his existent potentialities, then he tends to act in ways which support this hypothesis” and conversely (Rogers 1961, 56). The connection that we feel with another when we are available to her cannot be experienced with an object, it really is an experience of the other as a subject. Rogers says “in these moments there is, to borrow Buber’s phrase, a real “I-Thou” relationship, a timeless living in the experience which is between the client and me. It is at the opposite pole from seeing the client, or myself, as an object. It is the height of personal subjectivity” (Rogers 1961, 222).

However, when we are not available, when we are ego-centred for example, we do not think that others are objects. In what sense then do we see others as objects when unavailable and as subjects or persons when available? This is still not clear, as it was for Marcel. Also, this aspect of availability seems to be a consequence of the other ones. It is because when we are available, we pay attention to another disinterestedly, care about her and see her as an autonomous being, that we can say that we see her as a person. Seeing another as a person does not seem to be a new aspect of the attitude of the one who is available, it is rather another characterisation of it, or a consequence of it.

Thus, like Marcel, these authors seem to think that seeing another as a person does not consist simply in knowing or seeing that she is a conscious being. It seems to involve something like an acute awareness that she is having a subjective experiences and that she is a free, autonomous being. It is difficult to give an example of what it means to see another as a subject with so little information. But I will try nonetheless:

When Rafael hears that Jesse would like to focus on her career rather than on her mother, he becomes annoyed and judgemental. He thinks that she cannot do that and that it would be wrong. But then, before he says anything, Jesse starts to cry and she explains that her situation is so difficult for her and that she really would like to be able to do it all and take care of her mother, but she just can't. Somehow, this is just too difficult for her. As Rafael sees the tears on Jesse's cheeks and listens to her cry of despair, something softens in him. He comes to see how much she is suffering. He starts to realise how difficult this situation is for Jesse. Her pain becomes more concrete or tangible to him. He sees that she is just all too human. For now, she finds herself simply unable to care for her mother. But who knows how she will feel tomorrow?

What it means to see another as an object and how we can see someone as an object while still taking her to be a conscious being is not clear. This will be further explored in [chapter 5](#).

### *Seeing justly*

The claim that the available being sees the other as she really is and that her look is more objective and accurate and/or more just is present in the accounts of Buber, Weil, Murdoch, Wolf and Frye. Buber says that "in the eyes of him who takes his stand in love" (Buber 1937, 15), and in the *I-Thou* relationship (in our words to the one who is available), "good people and evil, wise and foolish, beautiful and ugly, become successively real to him; that is, set free they step forth in their singleness and confront him as Thou" (Buber 1937, 15). To the one who is not available, others are experienced as objects and not people. This means that the unavailable one does not see others as they are; they do not exist for her. Availability thus helps us to see things (and people) as they are.

Weil's stand on this is a bit different. For her, attention enables us to discriminate "between the real and the illusory" (Weil 2002, 120). She says that in general, to check whether something that we see is an illusion or not, "We change our position while looking" (Weil 2002, 120). "In the inner life, time takes the place of space. With time we are altered, and, if as we change we keep our gaze directed towards the same thing, in the end illusions are scattered and the real becomes visible" (Weil 2002, 120). It is sustained attention towards the same thing under different perspectives that reveals what is real and what is not. As we said in the beginning, what Weil calls attention is what we call availability. What she says here can thus be applied to availability. If we want to see another as she really is, we need to pay attention

to her and to be available to her. However, it is not clear how the change of perspective applies to availability. Does it mean that we have to be available over time in order to see another as she is?

For Weil, availability also enables us to see the other justly, meaning not only correctly or rightly, but with justice. She says that justice consists in availability: “[justice] means giving our attention to the victim of affliction as to a being and not a thing” (Weil 1959, 153). When we are available to someone, we are just towards her and thus sees her justly. Unfortunately, the connection between availability, justice, and seeing what is real is not further unexplained.

Murdoch took over this claim and explained it in more detail. To see how we see what is in a just way when we are available, let’s take Murdoch’s popular and informative example of a mother thinking about her daughter-in-law (this will be our illustrative example for this component):

A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile... However, the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: “I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look... M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters... D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on. (Murdoch 1971, 17-18)

According to Murdoch, “when M is just and loving she sees D as she really is” (Murdoch 1971, 37). The way M comes to see D is not simply a shift of perspective. When we move to change our point of view, the way things look to us is different, but it does not necessarily imply that our way of seeing is more accurate. It is just another perspective on the same thing. The shift of perspective that M experiences is different, because it enables her to see D “as she really is”. M realises that her vision was distorted by her being “prejudiced and narrow-minded” (Murdoch 1971, 17-18) and this enables her to remove this filter and try to see D “as she really is” (Murdoch 1971, 37). “Self-centred aims and images” are “blinding” and pure “fantasy” (Murdoch 1971, 67). When available, we really “see” others because our “soul” is liberated from “fantasy” of self-centeredness and prejudice (Murdoch 1971, 66).

Wolf agrees with Murdoch on this point. According to her the love that availability consists in is “a love that sees the beloved ... clearly and fully, “as she really is”, a love that sees the beloved’s faults and weaknesses as well as her virtues and strengths, and loves unreservedly

nonetheless (Wolf 2014, 378). There are other types of love where we see, or try to see, only the positive in another (Wolf 2014, 372). But those types of love are different from availability and they are not “good love” (Wolf 2014, 377) or “the best love” (Wolf 2014, 378). As presented above, when available, we are interested in another for her own sake and this “motivates one to look at [her] and to try to understand [her] on [her] own terms” (Wolf 2014, 383). We are not blinded by our own perspective and our prejudiced way at looking at her and can thus see her as she really is.

Lastly, Frye describes the same bias of the unavailable being. When we are unavailable, we have the conviction that everything is “for [us]” or “against [us]”, and it leads us to falsely interpret our experiences in that way. We “tends to animate things, imagining attitudes towards [ourselves] as the animating motives” (Frye 1983, 67). The unavailable being “falsifies” and “doesn’t care about truth: [she] simplifies, where the truth is complex; [she] invents, when [she] should be investigating; [she] expects, when [she] should be waiting to find out” (Frye 1983, 75). Her arrogant and self-centred look on others prevents her from seeing the truth or reality. By contrast then, the available being is, again, able to see others as they really are.

Murdoch, Wolf and Frye all agree that when we are unavailable, we have a distorted vision of others. Our prejudices, aims, and goals prevent us from seeing them as they really are. By contrast, when we are available, we are interested in others for their own sake, we are aware that they are independent beings and we try to understand them from their own frames of reference, and this enables us to see them justly, or correctly. Thus presented, this aspect of availability seems to follow from the other ones. It is because we pay attention to another disinterestedly, without self-regarding motivation that we can see her as she is. However, it is not certain that Murdoch and Weil would agree with this. Perhaps, for them, the fact that when we are available, we see another justly is not simply a consequence of availability, but a distinct feature of availability. This also opens the questions whether when available, we always or necessarily see others justly, or if it only helps or enables us to see them justly, without guaranteeing it.

#### *Availability as a receptive attitude*

It is interesting to notice that Weil, Noddings, and Rogers describe availability as a receptive attitude. What this means is far from clear. Rogers says that when available, we “receive” another person, and that “there is implied in this term the concept of being understood, empathically, and the concept of acceptance” (Rogers 1961, 131). We receive another in Rogers’ sense if we understand her from her own frame of reference and refrain from judging her and genuinely prize her. For Rogers “receiving” another seems closely related to “acceptance”, but Weil and Noddings describe it differently.

For Weil, receiving another seems to be rather a matter of content of thought: when available “the soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being

it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth” (Weil 1959, 115). We receive another in the sense that our mind is free of any other preoccupation, which enables it to be occupied by a new object, the other person. The use of the verb “receive” also suggests a kind of receptivity to a demand or to a proposition, or at least, a reaction to a movement initiated by someone else. For Weil, becoming available is not something we can choose or will. It is rather a matter of “inspiration” that comes from outside. This means that the change to availability is not initiated by us, it rather comes to us. The verb receiving thus conveys the idea that the available being accepts to be seized by another and to focus on her.

Noddings follows Weil and Marcel in saying that the attitude of availability is receptive (Noddings 2002, 13). But she understands “receptive” as being opposed to “projective” (Noddings 2002, 13). She is worried that if availability is associated with empathy, we will think that being available consists in projecting our “own personality into the personality of another in order to understand [her] better” (Noddings 2002, 13). But availability is not a projective attitude and it is not “controlled entirely by the carer” (Noddings 2002, 14), it is “relational” (Noddings 2002, 15). She also insists that “the reception is not totally passive” (Noddings 2002, 15); we are actively paying attention. Thus, for Noddings, availability is receptive in the sense that we pay attention to another, are in a relationship with her, and do not project ourselves in her situation.

Although different authors mention the fact that availability is a receptive attitude, it is not clear that this component adds anything to what has been said thus far since it is understood as acceptance or as selflessness. Noddings’ understanding of receptive attitude seems to be rather negative (availability does not involve projection) and comes back to the fact that the available ones understands the other person on her own terms, from her own frame of references. This has already been mentioned in acceptance and seeing through the eyes of the other. Because this component does not seem to add anything new, I will not offer an illustrative example.

#### **iv. Other Aspects of Availability**

##### *Availability and the Will*

For Weil and Murdoch, availability is not an attitude that can be willed. The will is a voluntary “stiffening of muscles” (Weil 1959 109); it is something that we control by force. “The will only controls a few movements of a few muscles, and these movements are associated with the idea of the change of position of nearby objects. I can will to put my hand flat on the table” (Weil 2002, 116). Things like “inner purity, inspiration or truth of thought” (Weil 2002, 116), and availability, cannot be willed. “Attention is bound up with desire ... —or more exactly, consent” (Weil 2002, 118). We can only desire or pray to be available. Murdoch agrees with Weil on the

will. She says that “most of what is often called “will” or “willing” belongs to this system [of fantasy]. What counteracts the system is attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love” (Murdoch 1971, 67). For her too, availability cannot be willed because it comes by loving another, and we cannot will to love someone.

Peck’s and Frye’s point of view are different, as they suggest that availability is a matter of “discipline” (Frye 1983, 75; Peck 1997, 51). The available being has to be able to distinguish between what is within the boundaries of the self and what is not, namely, the other person, and this requires a certain discipline. This suggests that for them, availability can be willed, or rather that we can develop our ability to be available.

We have here two opposed points of view. On the one hand, Weil and Murdoch claim that availability has nothing to do with the will. Peck and Frye, by contrast, suggest that we need discipline or some sort of exercising, to become easily, or often, available. To come back to our example of Rafael and Jesse, we can ask: is Rafael in control of his response to Jesse? Can he decide to pay attention to her rather than to stay focused on his concern about his thesis? It seems that he can decide to take Jesse’s perspective, but is he in control of his emotional response to Jesse? Can he decide whether he responds in a non-judgemental, accepting and supporting way, or does he find himself judging Jesse and disapproving of her despite his will to support her? If it turns out that availability can never be willed, then we need to ask how we can become available. Is it a matter of chance? What kinds of factors need to be present, internal or external? Those questions are important, because if we think that availability is good and that we should be more available for example, we need to know what is necessary for someone to become available. These questions will be addressed in [chapter 6](#).

#### *Availability as a moment*

Should we strive to always be available or is unavailability important as well? This last question is an important one but is addressed only by Buber and Noddings. Even though Marcel acknowledges that most of the time we are not available, he presents availability as good and desirable per se and without qualification. But it is possible that availability is not always desirable and that being unavailable is sometimes important too. Buber is the only one, with Noddings – who herself quotes Buber – to stress the importance of both availability and unavailability, or in his words, of the “I-It” and “I-Thou” relationships. First, Buber states that it is not possible always to be available: “Without *It*, man cannot live” (Buber 1937, 34). We need to be unavailable to function properly, to understand the world around us and achieve our ends. But availability is very precious; Buber says that it is what makes us men (Buber 1937, 34) and persons (Buber 1937, 65). It is, however, not possible to be available all the time and it does not make sense to always strive for availability. The two attitudes keep following each other, alternating so that the distinction between them can even become blurry: “The *It* is the

eternal chrysalis, the *Thou* the eternal butterfly – except that situations do not always follow one another in clear succession, but often there is a happening profoundly twofold, confusedly entangled” (Buber 1937, 17-18). For Buber, what matters is that we become available at a certain point, for a moment, but not for ever.

Noddings draws from Buber and notices that availability can only be temporary: “The moment of nearly pure relation passes; one must think what to do” (Noddings 2002, 17). Availability is very important because it enables us to understand others. But it is not an end in itself and we should not try to remain available all the time. Rather, there is a time to be available, and then there is a time for action, when we act in light of what we have understood about the other person when we were available.

Illustrative example:

After having listened for a while to Jesse and offering support, Jesse asks Rafael what he thinks she should do. At that moment, he stops focusing on Jesse, on what she feels and he stops trying to understand her. Rather, he thinks about Jesse’s situation and thinks about what he thinks is best to do. He tries to make up his own mind on the matter.

Alternatively:

Jesse never asks for Rafael’s advice, but after a while, she turns to him and ask him about what is going on in his own life. He starts telling her what he has been up to.

Alternatively:

After listening for a while, Rafael realises that he needs to go because he has another appointment. He then leaves.

In all those cases, Rafael has to stop being available, at some point, in order to do something else.

For both Buber and Noddings, it is clear that although availability is very important and beneficial for our relationships with others, we cannot be available all the time and we shouldn’t want to be, because unavailability is also very important. On this aspect, Buber and Noddings really differentiate themselves from Marcel, but for good reasons. However, neither Buber nor Noddings explain when availability is good or appropriate and for how long. In this thesis, I do not address normative questions regarding availability and do not discuss when it is morally required or good to be available. However, I will discuss when availability is effective and how duration relates to that in [chapters 2 and 4](#).

## **v. Importance of Availability**

Although the relevance of availability lies in its different features, why the authors presented above cared about availability has not come through in the above description. It is, however,

essential to understand not only what availability is, but why it is important. As the reasons why these authors care about availability vary quite a lot, I will outline each author's view on the matter.

For Buber, availability or, as he calls, it the I-Thou relation, is important because it enables a relationship with another person, and thus love (Buber 1937, 6, 14). The world of unavailability is a world of silence and solitude where we are disconnected from the world and others. The world of availability, however, is one of dialogue, connection and love. Because relationships are so essential to us, availability makes us persons and gives us access to the real life, to the kind of life that matters (Buber 1937, 28, 44). Availability is also important because it is the attitude that enables a relationship with God. Buber also says that the experience of availability makes us "grow" (Buber 1937, 109). However, Buber says little about why relationships (with the world, others or God) are so important and what the impact of availability is.

For Weil, the attitude of availability is essential because it gives us access to the "authentic and pure values – truth, beauty and goodness" (Weil 2002, 120). The artist needs to be available to make something beautiful (Weil 2002, 119), similarly, the student needs to be available to discover what is real and true. Availability also plays an important moral role because of its connection to goodness. We need to be available to others to apply Jesus' commandment to love our neighbour. When we are available to others, we are automatically compelled to do what is right by them (Weil 2002, 119). Lastly, availability has a great religious importance. It is through availability that salvation is brought about and praying consists in being available (Weil 1959, 196; 2002, 117). Hence, for Weil, availability is essential to the good life.

As Murdoch was inspired by Weil, her stance on this point is close to Weil's. We saw earlier that for Murdoch, availability enables us to see what is real in a just way. Like Weil, Murdoch thinks that this makes availability essential for the artist, but especially for the moral agent. In fact, she says that availability is "the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent". It enables us to see other people's needs and compels us to act. But availability is a virtue not only because it makes us act morally towards others, but also because the state of availability itself is just. For Murdoch, the importance of availability is thus mainly ethical.

In her paper on loving attention, Wolf undertakes to provide a more precise understanding of availability, but she does not discuss its importance. She follows Murdoch by saying that it is a "moral ideal" (Wolf 2014, 382) because availability "counteracts the tendencies to be self-absorbed and selfish, two of the greatest sources of immorality in the world" (Wolf 2014, 384). She gives, however, no further explanation or justification.

Noddings also says very little on the importance of availability itself. She says it is part of what caring is, but it is not sure what role she takes availability to play. It seems to be

important mainly because it enables us to understand others and thus to identify their needs. Noddings also says little about why caring is important in general; perhaps she takes it to be too obvious. One thing that she mentions is that caring makes us respond to other people's needs and help them grow (Noddings 2002, 20).

For Frye, availability matters deeply because it is an attitude towards others that does not appropriate them and that respects their autonomy. She thus thinks that availability is the right attitude to hold towards another, especially women, who have been enslaved by men who have failed to see women as independent beings. For Frye, like Murdoch, availability is the just and moral attitude to hold towards others. But this is not the aspect of availability she stresses. What matters most to her is the practical consequences of availability. If men become available to women, women will start to see themselves as free independent beings and their enslavement by men will end, at last.

Rogers' and Peck's interest in availability is very concrete. They are not interested in the morality and justice of availability but rather in its practical consequences on ourselves and others. Peck thinks that availability is very important for good communication (Peck 1997, 50). When we listen to someone and are available to her, "the speaker will feel less and less vulnerable and more and more inclined to open up the inner recesses of his or her mind to the listener. As this happens, speaker and listener begin to understand each other better and better. True communication is underway and the duet dance of love has begun" (Peck 1997, 51). Availability is thus important because, according to Peck, it is a very good communication tool. He also says that availability has a therapeutic effect (Peck 1997, 51), but he does not describe it.

For Rogers, availability matters for any type of relationship because, according to him, when we are available to others, good changes happen. His claims about the impact of availability are conclusions that he drew for his many years of experience as a psychotherapist. Rogers thinks that we cannot change as long as we do not accept ourselves as we are (Rogers 1961, 17). When we do, change happens naturally and so easily that it can "come about almost unnoticed" (Rogers 1961, 17). By being available and thus acceptant towards another, we show this person that she has value and can be accepted just as she is, and this incites her to do the same towards herself. By being available to someone, we do not change her, but she spontaneously comes to change herself. Rogers says that if we can be available, "the other person will discover within himself the capacity to use that relationship for growth and change and personal development will occur" (Rogers 1961, 33). This person will come to see all the resources that she has at her disposal and will start to use them. Availability is important for Rogers not because of its impact on the one who is available, but because of the change it brings about in the person who is the object of availability.

In conclusion, these authors consider that availability in our relationships with others is important for various reasons, which are not always completely clear. The impact of availability on ourselves and on the one we are available to is seldom described in detail. We can nevertheless observe two tendencies. On one side, philosophers like Weil and Murdoch see the importance of availability from a moral point of view. Availability is important because it is a good, or just way to be towards the other. They, however, do not argue for it and the connection between availability and morality remains loose. On the other side, psychotherapists like Rogers and Peck, but also philosophers like Frye, think availability matters because of its practical impact on others. None of them, however, seems to stress, as Marcel does, the impact that availability has on ourselves and on the way we see others.

## vi. Synthesis

The descriptions of the different components of availability described above, together with the recapitulating table, show that they are close to each other and very much in line with Marcel's. Most of the features of availability that he identified are widely shared with the other authors. There is only one aspect of availability that is mentioned by other authors but not by him: *availability as a moment*. There are also some aspects of availability that are described in more detail by other authors than by Marcel. For example, Marcel does not say what it means to accept someone and only mentions non-interference. Rogers goes further than Marcel in describing those features of availability. In general, there is no opposition or major difference between Marcel and the other predecessors, even though their approach is very different from each other.

### *The case of Marilyn Frye*

Marilyn Frye is the only one who stands out of this understanding of availability. She shares only three components of empathy with the other authors and explicitly rejects four of them. She agrees that when we are available, we pay attention to someone else but denies that it implies that we forget about ourselves. According to her, when available, we are not disinterested and do not understand the other person from her perspective. A few more words are needed to understand why her point of view is different from the others' and why she has nevertheless been included in the list of thinkers who described availability. As outlined above, what seems to motivate her disagreement with the other authors is the context in which she speaks of availability and her motivations for being interested in it. Marilyn Frye described availability and unavailability in a feminist paper. She thinks that men are typically unavailable towards the world and especially towards women. They do not see them as free independent beings, but as objects of their world, that are at their disposal and that exist for them to use. According to Frye, because women are seen in that way, they come to see themselves in that

way too, and thus are enslaved and doomed to be at men's disposal. As a result, unavailability should be seen as harmful and availability is much needed to free women.

According to her, when we are available, we see others as free independent beings that exist for themselves and have their own interests. We are also very aware of the self-other distinction:

The discipline is one of self-knowledge, knowledge of the scope and boundary of the self. What is required is that one knows what one's interests, desires and loathings, projects, hungers, fears and wishes are, and that one knows what is and what is not determined by these. In particular, it is a matter of being able to tell one's own interests from those of others and of knowing where one's self leaves off and another begins. (Frye 1983, 75)

If availability made us forget about ourselves, we could no longer distinguish between ourselves and others. This is why it does not require selflessness. In fact, for Frye it is incompatible with it (Frye 1983, 75).

Even though Frye's account is different from the other ones, she has been included in the list of authors describing availability because like the other ones, she describes an attitude of attention to another where we see that she is an independent free being, where our view of this person is not distorted by egocentrism, and in which there is no will to appropriate her. In that sense, her concept of availability is quite close to the others'. In addition, her account is interesting because it puts under the spotlight the seemingly incoherence between two aspects of availability: selflessness and seeing the other as an autonomous being distinct from the self. How can we see the other as distinct from us if we are not aware of ourselves?

### **1.3 What Is Availability?**

It is now time to take stock and to see if the descriptive work that we have done can help us to understand what availability is more precisely and perhaps formulate a definition. Although the authors mentioned here had often different conceptions of each of the features, some congruence between them was observed and I postulated one main way of understanding each of them. I will now see if we can draw an understanding of availability from this descriptive work. For this, the classification of features made earlier will be useful. We can rule out the features that are effects of availability since they result from availability, but do not constitute it. It came out of the descriptions that this is the case for seeing another as a subject, seeing justly, and receptivity.

Interestingly, the two components categorised as higher-level components, namely acceptance and non-interference also appeared to result from other, more fundamental, features of availability. As explained above, acceptance seems to be constituted by a prizing,

a caring, or a loving of the other person plus the absence of judgement and categorisation of the other person. The prizing or caring was identified as a low-level affective component. In the above description, I also outlined that the non-judgement feature likely follows from the fact that when available, we are paying full attention to another person. If we are focused on someone and are trying to understand that person, we cannot, at the same time, judge and categorise her. Furthermore, it also seemed that because when we are available, we love, or care about the person we are available to, we accept her as she is. Similarly, the feature of non-interference appeared to be an outcome of the prizing or care for the other person. When we are available, we respect the person we are available to and do not want to interfere with her because we care about her. Thus, it seems that we can also rule out that those two features as core ones.

This leaves us with the features identified as low-level. We could thus say that availability consists in paying attention to another selflessly and disinterestedly, in caring about her or loving her, in taking that person's perspective, and in feeling sympathy (or empathy) for her. However, it seems that some of these features overlap. For example, when we pay attention to someone and care about her, we are paying attention to that person for her own sake, in a disinterested way, and our motivation is not self-related. We are thus disinterested and selfless.

Furthermore, at numerous points in the description of availability, it has been said that when we are available, we are trying to understand the one we are available to. Understanding seems to play an important role, although it has not been characterised as a feature on its own. If that is the case, when we are available, we pay attention to another person and want to better understand her. The feature of seeing through another's eyes can also be interpreted in that way: we take someone's perspective in order to better understand her.

It thus seems that we are left with four core features of availability:

When we are available to someone, we

- 1) pay attention to that person
- 2) try to understand her and taking her perspective
- 3) we are motivated by care, love (or prizing)
- 4) we feel empathy, sympathy, or compassion.

Availability seems thus to be an affective and cognitive attitude in which we pay acute attention to another, try to understand her, but also care about her and feel sympathy for her.

However, these four core features of availability cannot yet constitute a satisfying definition of availability. I have voiced some criticisms along the descriptions of availability of Marcel and of the other authors. Here I would like to point to two specific problems that we still need to solve to gain a satisfactory understanding of availability. First, the main concepts of the four features identified (attention, care, love, empathy, sympathy) have not been defined. Those are broad concepts that are used in many ways and leaving them undefined results in

a lack of clarity. If we want to use them to define availability, we need to explain what we mean by them (see [chapters 2 and 3](#)). The second problem is that it is not clear how the four features identified above are connected to each other (if they are connected at all) and, as a result, it is not clear what structure availability has. A satisfying definition of availability should solve these two problems.

There are also many other questions that have remained at least partially unanswered. For example, what type of understanding of another are we looking for when we are available? Can we be available to someone if we misunderstand her? This opens the question whether availability is satisfied only by internal conditions or if there are external ones as well. None of these authors wondered whether we can be wrongly or incorrectly available. On the same line, are there, as Marcel suggested, degrees of availability, and if yes, what degree is sufficient for it to count as availability?

It is also not clear what our relationship with others must be for us to be available to them. All of these authors take examples where we are in direct relation with another person who is right in front of us. But we can pay attention to someone who is not present, with whom we are communicating by phone, or written message. We can even pay attention to someone with whom we are not communicating at all, someone in the train for example, or on TV, or someone that we are simply thinking about. In these cases, can we be available to them? None of these authors addressed those questions, and it is far from obvious how we should answer them.

Moreover, none of these authors wondered what the nature of availability is. Is it a mental state, a disposition, an emotion, a character trait, or even, a virtue? The general and usual concept of availability refers to a disposition. But Marcel and the other authors rather describe it as an attitude in the general sense, that is, as a stance one holds towards another, or as a type of relationship. We need to specify what place availability holds in the typology of the mind.

All of these authors seem to be interested in availability because of its impact on the other or on our relationship. They say that when we are available, we see the other as she really is, a person, and we can connect with her. But they give little description of how availability changes our perception of the other or of the changes it makes in our relationship. Once the effect of availability has been clarified, we also need to wonder whether we need to be available for a minimum length of time to see those results or not.

We can also ask how we become available. We saw that authors disagree regarding the role that the will plays in availability. Some of them say that availability cannot be willed, others that becoming available is a matter of discipline or training. It is important to clarify what the causes of availability are, especially if we think that being available is a good thing and that we should try to be more available. If availability is not something we can learn and master, then

it is not something that we can promote and encourage even if being available has good consequences.

This opens the question of the relationship between availability and morality. Many of the concepts used to describe availability are thick concepts. They involve an evaluation (Blomberg 2010). For example, love, care, being open, sympathy and empathy, and acceptance are positively connoted. The way these authors describe availability also suggests that being available is good. But, in what sense is availability good? Is it pleasurable, or efficient for some purpose like communicating efficiently with someone, or is it morally good to be available? None of the authors directly addressed this question. It is, however, an important one, because, as only Buber and Noddings noticed, it is not possible, and perhaps also, not desirable always to be available. We need further analysis to determine whether it is ever wrong to be unavailable to someone and whether there is ever a duty to be available to the other.<sup>4</sup>

In conclusion, the descriptions provided by the authors mentioned above are precious to identify the phenomenon under study, and to give us a fairly good idea of what availability is. However, many aspects are unclear, and many questions are left unanswered. The object of this thesis will be to address these questions.

#### **1.4 Conclusion**

Although there has been little philosophical work on availability, this topic seems to have emerged as a centre of interest for authors close to phenomenology in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe. The historical and philosophical context of that time that saw two World Wars (Buber and Weil were Jews) seem to have led philosophers to wonder about questions related to intersubjectivity: how do we encounter another? How do we perceive her and what is she to us? When do we see her as an object vs. as a subject? Marcel, Buber, and Weil noticed the importance of availability, in their own individual way, since their work developed independently. But after this short outburst of interest for availability, it seems to have slowly decreased, at least in philosophy. The descriptions that we can find in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are often based on the ones of Marcel, Buber, Weil, and Murdoch, and are very brief and marginal. It is also surprising to see that attention to availability almost stopped at a time when research on closely related topics such as empathy was becoming increasingly popular. Availability remained popular in psychotherapy since Rogers' person-centred style of therapy became one of the major ones, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries. However, even

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<sup>4</sup> However, in this dissertation I will only ask descriptive questions about availability, except in [chapter 6](#), where I will try to determine what degree of availability is best for a doctor.

in that field, there is no precise definition and description of availability (Drollinger, Comer, and Warrington 2006; Fassaert et al. 2007; Bodie 2011).

If availability plays such an important role in our relationships with others, it deserves more philosophical attention. My aim here is to reopen the discussion on availability in philosophy and to bring it further. All the descriptions of availability, philosophical and non-philosophical alike, have remained somewhat unclear and imprecise, and, as explained earlier, many questions about availability have not been asked. In the following chapters, I will undertake to provide a new and precise description of availability and answer those questions so as to come to an understanding of what availability is, its role and its importance for our social lives.

## 2. Defining Availability

In this second chapter, I try to deepen our understanding of availability by providing a more precise definition and answering questions such as what kind of thing is availability, what its duration, and what are degrees of availability? In the first section, I discuss the objectives that a new definition of availability should achieve and what method should be used to develop it. In the second section, I provide the new definition, explain it and argue that it best captures what availability is. In the third section, I describe availability further by discussing the degrees of availability, its duration, and other aspects such as how one must be related to another to be available to her. I then explore the nature of availability and argue that it is a mental action rather than a mental state. I also examine the scope of availability by looking at the constraints that the definition sets regarding who can be available and to whom. I end by comparing the new definition of availability to the ones of the precursors and explain why some of the features of availability identified in [chapter 1](#) should be rejected.

### 2.1 How Can We Define Availability?

#### *Objectives of the definition*

In the [first chapter](#), we looked at existing accounts of availability in hope of understanding what it is. We were able to identify four core features of availability but saw that they could not constitute a satisfying definition. One problem was that they were not precise enough. For example, there seem to be a motivational element in availability, but it is not clear whether it is a form of care, love, or prizing. A second problem was that we did not know whether the core features are related to each other and if they are, how. A satisfying definition of availability should thus avoid those two problems.

Furthermore, a satisfying definition should satisfy certain conditions regarding its form. We are looking for a definition that is precise and clear, so that it avoids ambiguities, but also that is concise. We do not want a definition that involves unnecessary or redundant features. It would not be clear what the central features of availability are. Rather, we want a definition that states only what is necessary and sufficient for a state to count as availability, so that we can easily apply it to different situations and be able to discern if it is a case of availability or not. The definition should also be formal in style.

The content of the definition should also satisfy further conditions. It should obviously be coherent. It should also involve or imply the four core features of availability identified in [chapter 1](#), namely that availability towards another involves

- 1) paying attention to that person
- 2) trying to understand her and taking her perspective
- 3) being motivated by care, love (or prizing)
- 4) feeling empathy, sympathy, or compassion.

Our practical interest in availability sets further satisfaction conditions. If we want to be able to test the pro-social effects of availability and, if conclusive, promote and teach it, we need a definition of availability that can be used empirically. That means that the definition of availability should refer to concrete and, if possible, known mental processes (cognitive and affective).

Third, it should have a wide application. Our interest in availability stemmed from the fact that it was described by several authors as a pro-social attitude that promotes satisfying relationships and produces effective helping behaviour in general. Ideally, availability should be possibly directed to anyone who can need help and any type of relationships. For example, a definition of availability that would make it applicable only to the context of family relationships would not be very interesting for our purpose. Therefore, we should not restrict the scope of availability unnecessarily. If we can find a definition that accounts for the four core features *and* has a wider scope, it should be preferred to others.

#### *Method*

How shall we proceed then to find this satisfying definition of availability? We have already looked at what past and contemporary philosophers have said on the topic and it did not prove completely satisfying. We shall thus try to find another way. Unfortunately, several other ways to come to a better understanding of a phenomenon in order to define it are closed to us. We cannot define availability based on the way it is used in ordinary language. As it has already been explained in the introduction, Marcel makes a different use of the term “availability” than its normal day-to-day one. There is no other term with which we can work since the other terms that have been used such as “attention” or “empathy” face the same problem. For the same reason, the etymology of availability cannot be of much use either. Furthermore, availability is not a concept common enough for us to have varied case examples that would provide us with a good basis for looking for a definition that would satisfy them all. Similarly, we cannot work with ascriptions of availability to see what the rules for ascribing availability are. Consequently, I will have to present a stipulative definition of availability and develop myself a definition based on the four core features identified in [chapter 1](#). However, my choices will not be arbitrary, but will be guided by the objectives set above.

At this stage, some might worry that availability is just an empty shell and if there were such a thing as availability, there would at least be a common enough concept for it in folk psychology. In fact, there seems to be such a folk-psychology concept, but not agreement on what to call it. Many people are speaking about “presence”, “openness”, “true or deep listening”

and seem to refer to availability, or something very close (see for example Staff 2010; « Being A Listening – Being Present » s. d.; Bailey s. d.; « Deep Listening » s. d.; Rosenberg 2003). Furthermore, based on what we have learnt about availability and on the four features that we have identified, we can see that availability is not a fundamental structure of our mind. It is not a type of fundamental mental state as beliefs and desires are. It is also not an emotion. Rather, it seems to be a complex state or attitude constituted by different more fundamental cognitive and affective states. There is thus such a thing as availability if we can clearly identify the mechanisms involved in this attitude and how they interact and if we have the ability to hold that attitude, and at least sometimes actually do hold it. That this is the case will become clear in this chapter (especially [section 2.2.1](#)). Furthermore, the importance of identifying this complex structure (among many other possible ones) will become apparent when we explore the effects of availability ([chapters 4 and 5](#)).

## **2.2 Availability: A New Definition**

I suggest that availability should be defined as follows:

*Availability:*

*One is available to another when one is paying attention to that person with the intention to understand her because one values her.*

Based on this definition, there are three conditions for availability. In order to be available to another, we need 1) to value that person, 2) to pay attention to her with the intention to understand her, and 3), to do 2) because of 1). In this section, I describe these three conditions, explain why they are necessary conditions for availability, and clarify how they work together.

### **2.2.1 We Value the Person We Are Available to**

By valuing, I mean seeing someone as good and therefore worth of care and respect. It involves the *experience* of another as good, rather than the *judgement* that another is good and the attribution of positive qualities (Oddie 2005; Frankfurt 1998; Seidman 2009). Attitudes such as love, admiration, care, interest, respect and concern involve such a valuing of their objects. This valuing is a pro-attitude, which means that it disposes us favourably towards someone and motivates us to promote, develop, protect, or realise that person's wellbeing. Valuing someone therefore involves a disposition to help this person, protect her and to react emotionally to what happens to her. When the person we value is in danger, we are worried for her, when she is finally safe, we feel relieved, etc. Valuing admits of degrees; we can love

someone passionately and be ready to do anything for her or like someone rather mildly and be willing to do only non-costly helping actions for her sake.

### *The valuing in detail*

The term valuing is thus not meant here as seeing someone or something as our core values. The one we are available to does not need to be one of the most important persons in our life. Rather, by valuing, I mean that when we are available, we see the person we are available to as having value, i.e. as good (Oddie 2005; Seidman 2009; Knobe and Preston-Roedder 2009; Scheffler 2010). This seeing as good involves a seeming, which is “an experiential, non-doxastic take on the value of” its object (Oddie 2005, 40) and can be done without attributing qualities to it. We can thus see something as good, like playing a video game, without judging it to be good, and, alternatively, judge that something is good, for example, a painting by Picasso, without seeing it ourselves as such.

Valuing is thus a type of pro-attitude, i.e. of positive conative attitudes. Desiring, wanting, intending, wishing, hoping, admiring, etc. are examples of pro-attitudes. Those attitudes have a valence (McShane 2013, 748) and include a positive and felt evaluation of their object. As McShane says, “To borrow a convention from emotivism, valuing attitudes say “Hooray!” for their objects in some way” (McShane 2013, 748). While desires are directed at propositions or state of affairs that are not the case, e.g. we desire an ice cream only when we do not already have one, valuing as intended here are directed towards objects – here, persons – who already satisfy our preferences.<sup>5</sup> Attitudes such as admiration, love, approval, and respect are types of valuing because they involve a positive evaluation of their objects such as they are in the moment of the evaluation.

It is unfortunately difficult to describe further the experience of goodness that constitutes the valuing. This is why, valuing, like other conative states such as desires, are often described dispositionally. Positive conative attitudes dispose us favourably towards their objects (Ewing 1948, 149; Gaus 1990, 69; McShane 2013, 749-50). If “the good just is that which needs to be pursued, or promoted, or embraced” (Oddie 2005, 41), then, something that we see as good presents itself to us as something that needs to be “pursued, or promoted, or embraced”. As a result, when we value someone, we want that person to be well off; we desire her wellbeing and will be motivated to protect or help her.

Valuing involves different types of dispositions such as to pay attention to its object and to be interested in it, to want to know more about it and to understand it better (Svavarsdóttir 2014). If we value a Picasso, we will want to see it and to spend some time

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<sup>5</sup> Some think that valuing also involves a seeing the object as important (Seidman 2009). However, I have not found a satisfying account of what being important is and it is not clear whether it is possible to provide one that is not circular (Frankfurt 1988; 2006). As a result, describing valuing as seeing something as important does not help us understand better what valuing is. This is why it has not been included here.

observing it. We will perhaps also want to understand it better and will be interested in learning more about its historical context. As already mentioned, valuing also involves dispositions to action so as to protect, safeguard, promote, help, etc. the integrity or the wellbeing of its object. If we value a Picasso, we will want to protect it from light or humidity. We will perhaps want to have it restored if it has been damaged and we will be motivated to donate money or raise funds to do that. Valuing something also makes us emotionally vulnerable to what happens to the object (Helm 2002). If we value Guernica, we will be worried as we hear that a fire is now raging in the museum where it is exhibited and then relieved to learn that it was not damaged or, by contrast, we will be saddened or even devastated by the news that it was destroyed. Valuing an object also disposes us to take that object as a source of reason (Seidman 2009; 2016). If we see Guernica as valuable, we will take ourselves to have a reason to protect it from the fire, if we can, to watch a documentary on it or to go to Madrid to see it, etc.

When we are available, the object of our valuing is another person. This means that we see this person under a positive light, as being good and that we are disposed to pay attention to that person, to be interested in her and to learn more about her. We are also emotionally vulnerable to what happens to her and are motivated to protect her or promote her wellbeing and disposed to see the fact that she is in danger as a reason to fear for her and to act so as to protect her.

The valuing of availability is directed towards another person “as a whole”. What I mean by that is that another person is seen as having value in herself rather than only a part or a characteristic of her. In that sense, valuing another person is a globalist attitude (Bell 2011, 451; 2013, 40). For example, we could value Raoul’s intelligence without valuing Raoul. Even if we value Raoul for his intelligence, when we are available to him, it is Raoul himself that seems good to us, and not only his intelligence.

Whether we value someone “as a whole” or not becomes manifest when the dispositions involved in the valuing are activated. The dispositions are directed towards the object of the valuing (Helm 2002). Thus, if we remain indifferent to the news that Raoul has been in a terrible accident and is now paraplegic because his intelligence has not been impacted, then we can see that it is only his intelligence that we value (Clausen 2019). If we value Raoul “as a whole”, then we will be interested in him and will want his wellbeing even in situations that do not concern the properties in virtue of which we value Raoul. Similarly, the valuing of availability is a valuing of someone for her sake. It is perhaps possible to value a homeless person we see on the street not for herself, but in order to think of ourselves as good persons, or to be seen as caring by others. In that case too, what is seen as good is not so much the homeless person, but us being seen as caring by others, and this latter state of affairs will be the object of our dispositions, rather than the homeless person. Thus, the valuing of availability is a valuing of someone in and for herself.

Valuings admit of degrees (Seidman 2009). For example, we usually value strangers less than we value family members. Respecting someone for her humanity seems to be a weaker form of valuing than the love that we have for our child. The degree of our valuing seems to depend on how good the object seems to us. Some objects seem better than others. For example, we might value all our colleagues, but value more one of them because she is exceptionally funny, and value less one of them, because they smell. Some types of goodness might also seem more worthy than others. For instance, we might have valued Mother Theresa more than Proust, because moral goodness seems to us to have more value than aesthetic goodness.

Again, we will be able to measure the degree of our valuing by looking at the dispositions involved in it. If two people we value are in the same difficult situation and we are willing to do more to help one than to help the other (and it is not because we cannot help both), then we value the former more. The more we value someone and the more we will be motivated to undertake costly actions to help or protect someone. Similarly, the more we value someone and the more we will be emotionally affected by what happens to them. If the two people we value are both at risk of dying and we feel more worried about the first than the second (this could be objectively measured by looking at physiological responses), then we value the first more than the second.

Whether we value someone seems to depend on this person's having properties that we like (or value). What Norma likes and dislikes about Ousmane will have an impact on Norma's globalist attitude towards him. For example, if there is nothing that Norma likes about Ousmane, but many things that she dislikes, Norma will very probably dislike Ousmane overall. But Norma's globalist attitude towards Ousmane is not determined by a simple calculation of the number of likes and dislikes. The intensity of Norma's attitudes also plays a role. She might like Ousmane's sense of humour, intelligence and generosity, but hate the fact that he is racist and have an overall negative attitude towards him, like contempt. On the contrary, Norma might dislike Ousmane's manner and taste, but have an overall deep respect for him because he is a highly engaged environmental activist. We can also think about a doctor or a pastor visiting a criminal who tortured children in prison and who nevertheless feels respect for her simply because she is a human being or a "child of God". The properties that we value in someone might also be relational ones. For example, we might value our father or our sister mainly because they are related to us. It even seems possible to value someone (for herself) originally in virtue of some of her properties that we value for instrumental reasons. Perhaps Lena values Jim "as a whole" because Jim is a nurse who takes care of Lena's grandmother or because he brings her cookies.

What we like and dislike about someone also seems to play a role in determining the degree to which we value someone. If there are many things that Norma likes about Ousmane,

she will likely value him more than if there were fewer. However, it is not clear that whether we value someone and to what degree is the direct result of the sum of what is valued and disvalued about that person. It is possible that the value that we see in someone as a whole exceeds the value that we see in the parts of that person (Clausen 2019). It is also not clear how we come to value someone “as a whole” rather than just some of her properties. One possibility is that if the sum of the valuing of the parts is positive, then we value the person “as a whole”, although we might still disvalue some of that person’s properties. Conversely, when the sum is negative, we disvalue this person, although we might still value some of her properties. For example, we usually value exceptional musicians, but when they do something reprehensible, for example kill their partner, we might find ourselves disvaluing them, although we still valuing their music.

How all of this works seems to be very complex. Those questions have occupied many philosophers of love for quite some time and I do not have the pretension of answering them all here. But I would like to add one more thing. Even if we value someone in virtue of some of her properties and will consider that this property is “our reason” for valuing this person, it is, nevertheless, not our motivating reason for valuing this person (or, more precisely, our agential reasons (Sandis 2012a)). We do not value people in light of their qualities. We do not decide whether we value someone or not as we decide to wear a suit or not in light of the reasons that we have. Rather, we value someone because she presents herself to us as valuable and this is not something that we seem to choose or that we weigh, in the same way as we do not choose how a perceptual object presents itself to us. It makes sense that whether something appears valuable to us depends (at least partly) on whether its parts or properties appear valuable to us, because they (at least partly) constitute that object’s value. This is why giving our reasons why we value something makes our valuing intelligible. However, when we value something, we do not respond to an assessment of reasons, but to how things present themselves to us. The mechanism that makes us value someone seem to be causal rather than rational. This probably explains why valuing and judgements of value can come apart and why we do not always know why we value (especially love) someone. Because valuing is not something that we do in light of reasons, we might not be aware of the different factors that elicited our valuing.

Some forms of valuing like caring or love are robust and are stable and sustained over time, at least over weeks or months (Frankfurt 1998; Svavarsdóttir 2014). This is not necessarily the case of valuing. We can value someone at an instant  $t$ , for example a survivor of a shipwreck speaking on television and forget completely about her afterwards. Our valuing of a given individual can even vary in time according to the situation. Some aspect of someone can be more salient than others at times, thus changing the overall attitude we hold towards her. For example, while at lunch, Vladimir’s disgust towards Paul’s way of eating can be so

strong that all that Vladimir likes about Paul is forgotten or seems at that time secondary. At that time, Paul does not present himself as good to Vladimir. But later, when they have finished eating and are discussing politics, Paul might present himself as good to Vladimir. According to the present definition, we can be available to someone at a given time if at that time we value that person. Whether we valued that person before and will value her in the future is not relevant for our ability to be available to someone in the present moment.

*Valuing rather than love, care or prizing*

This valuing component of the new definition partly accounts for the third core feature identified in [chapter 1](#): being motivated by care, love (or prizing). Authors did not seem to agree on what the motivational attitude of availability is, but most of them seem to concur that, first, the motivational attitude of availability involves a positive evaluation of its object and that, second, this attitude is such that we can potentially hold it towards anyone. Even those who used the term “love”, like Weil, meant it in a general sense, as the Biblical “love for one’s neighbour”. None of them implied that we can be available only towards close ones. Rather, their examples of availability often involved strangers. Therefore, the divergences between them seemed to be mostly terminological.

The concept of valuing described above is thus essentially the same as what these authors called love or prizing: it is a general pro-attitude, that we can have potentially for anyone. For example, we could value a stranger simply because she is a human being. It is also to keep this width in scope that no minimal degree of valuing is required and that it is not necessary that the valuing endures through time. In that way, we can be available to a stranger even if our degree of valuing is low compared to the degree to which we value our friends, and even if we forget about that person after our encounter and stop valuing her.

I chose the term valuing, rather than love, care, or prizing, because those terms are often used for more demanding attitudes. Love, in its common sense, is a type of valuing, but a more robust, persistent one, which requires a high degree of valuing. It is something that we do not hold towards anyone. We would not love a stranger that we see speaking on TV for the first time. Rather, we usually love people that we know, that we value to a high degree, and especially, people with whom we have long-standing relationships with. I did not want to convey the idea that availability involves this type of pro-attitude.

Similarly, I decided not to use the term care. Some authors take caring and valuing to be the same thing (Seidman 2009), but others take care to be quite a robust form of valuing that endures through time, at least over months or years (Svavarsdóttir 2014; Frankfurt 1998). As just explained, this seems too demanding for availability. Lastly, although many authors consider that care involves a positive evaluation of its object (Seidman 2009; Frankfurt 1998), it is less clear that this is so than with valuing. It seems acceptable to say that a drug addict cares about receiving her drug dose, although it is not something that she sees as good. We

can say that we care about what happened to Jews during World War II without thereby implying that we take the Shoah to be a good thing. The term of valuing is less equivocal because it conveys the sense of a necessary positive evaluation of its object. Valuing therefore appeared a better choice.

Lastly, the term “prizing” in its common sense means to value or esteem something highly (« Prize, v.1 » s. d.) and using it would convey the sense that availability involves a high degree of valuing and thus is not an attitude that we can hold towards anyone.

### **2.2.2 We Pay Attention to Another with the Intention to Understand Her**

Paying attention is here understood as selecting one object as a main object of consciousness. What attention is precisely is debated, but authors seem to agree that it is a selection or prioritisation process that is done according to what our aim or priority is (Wu 2014; Styles 2006; Watzl 2017). This means that our attention selects or puts at the centre of our minds the elements that can help us reach our aim. In availability, the aim is to understand someone and it is this intention that guides our attention. Understanding another involves knowing what that person’s mental states are, but also seeing how they relate to each other and, as a result being able to explain them. This is, as I will call it, a propositional understanding of another. It is highly debated how we achieve such an understanding of others, but we seem to do it through different means such as applying folk-psychology principles, imaginatively putting ourselves in others’ situations, and directly seeing what they feel or what they are doing (Avramides 2019). Through perspective taking, we can also experience affective empathy and feel what another is feeling or something close to it, and “get” what that person is going through. This understanding is rather an experiential one. When we are available, we are paying attention to someone with the intention to understand that person both at the propositional and experiential levels.

#### *Paying attention*

Attention is here understood in its broad and traditional sense, which is as the selection of one object of consciousness over others (James 1950, 403 v. 1). When we are available to someone else, we select this person as our main object of focus. This can come in degrees and we can pay more or less attention to someone (Watzl 2010, 28). For example, Janet might be so focused on Lola that she becomes oblivious to the rest of the world, but she might also focus on Lola and remain aware of her environment and of the people walking by. She might also have thoughts about how late it is and what she needs to do next. Nevertheless, when we are available, the person we are available to is our main object of focus. Note that attention here is not understood only as visual observation. It is possible to pay attention to someone by

looking at that person, but we can pay attention to her by listening to her on the phone or even simply by thinking about her.

What attention is more precisely is debated. For example, Watzl takes it to be regulation for priority structures (Watzl 2017), Wu selection for action (Wu 2014), and Styles goal activation (Styles 2006). It is not useful for our purpose of understanding availability to enter the complex considerations of this debate. What is interesting for us, however, is that it seems that these authors agree with James that attention “implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others” (James 1950, 404) and, more importantly, that they agree that the selection of information is not done randomly, but depends on what we are trying to do or our priorities. This means that if our aim (or our priority) is to help someone, our attention will select and structure elements in a way that promotes this aim. The elements that are relevant for helping this person will be at the centre of our consciousness, whereas the ones that are irrelevant will be pushed aside. When we are available, we are not paying attention to someone to manipulate her or to draw her picture, but to understand her.

#### *Understanding others*

What is it to understand someone and how do we come to such an understanding? This will be the object of a detailed analysis in [chapter 5](#). At this stage, and for the sake of understanding what availability is, a first general explanation of interpersonal understanding will suffice. To know what it is to understand someone, we first have to identify what its object is. To do that, I suggest looking at what we can possibly mean when we say that we do or do not understand someone.

“We understand S” can mean that we understand

- a) What she is saying to us
- b) Why she did A.
- c) What she intends to do.
- d) What she feels.
- e) What she believes/desires/feels/intends to do
- f) Why she believes/desires/feels/intends to do X.
- g) Her perspective on X.
- h) Her values
- i) Many of the above in general, or on a regular basis

Interestingly, the object of understanding in a), c), e) is the object of another’s mental state. What we want to understand is what figures in the other’s thought as things that she believes, desires, intend to say, or do. In those cases, the object of understanding is facts, or considerations, to which the other stands in a relation such as taking to be true, seeing as desirable or as something to bring about. Similarly, d) refers to the content of someone’s experience. The object of understanding in b) and f) are reasons, that is, other facts or

considerations that the other believes, desires, etc., and that she takes to be speaking in favour of doing A or believing, desiring, or feeling X. In all those cases, we are trying to understand another's mental state: the type of mental state and its object. Furthermore, someone's values are someone's most important and long-standing preferences or desires. As a result, h) can be taken as well to refer to the understanding of a number of mental states, possibly non-occurrent. Lastly, the object of understanding in g) can also be considered to be mental states. A perspective on something is constituted by the different thoughts (beliefs, desires, etc.) that we have on an object. g) can thus be taken to refer to a group of mental states.

Thus, understanding someone can usually be reduced to understanding someone's mental state-s at a given time or about a given object. For example, recall the example given in [chapter 1](#) of Milena who has just learnt that her application for a journalist position at the media company where she has been interning for the past six months and for which she worked really hard has been rejected and that Milena and Sandrine, who are very close friends, are meeting. In this case, for Sandrine to try to understand Milena means trying to understand her perspective on her situation. It involves understanding that Milena feels depressed and disappointed, that she believes her application was rejected because she was not good enough for the job, that this implies that she is not a good journalist, and that she has the intention of stopping trying to become a journalist.

We can now try to see what characterises understanding. We need here to distinguish between understanding what mental state someone is in and why someone has some mental state. Understanding what state someone is in often means identifying the type of state held and its object. Understanding why someone has some mental state, however, requires not only identifying the mental state, but also being able to explain it, which we usually do in terms of other mental states and their relations to it. Similarly, when we try to understand someone's perspective, it is not just one mental state that we are trying to understand, but a group of them.

Understanding is then not only about identifying, or knowing the different mental states, but also about seeing how they all "hang together" or how "everything fits" (Baumberger, Beisbart, and Brun 2017; Riggs 2003). This implies seeing how the different elements are related to each other (Kvanvig 2003). In the case of understanding someone's perspective, this requires seeing what beliefs are taken as reasons for believing, desiring, intending, feeling, what preference motivates desires and intentions, what explains her emotions and what, in the subject's eye justify them, etc. In the case of Milena, this will imply grasping how Milena's belief that her application was rejected because she is not good enough makes her feel depressed and motivates her intention to stop trying to become a journalist. Understanding why someone has some mental state is similar to understanding a perspective, in that it requires the identification of different mental states and the grasping of the relations that exist between them.

What the “seeing” or “grasping” of the relations between the different mental states consists in is not clear, but it at least involves some abilities such as the one to explain the object of understanding and to infer or predict correct descriptions of counterfactual scenarios regarding the object (Baumberger, Beisbart, and Brun 2017; Riggs 2003; Grimm, Baumberger, and Ammon 2016). Consequently, if Sandrine understands Milena, she should be able to explain why Milena is depressed and why she is thinking about dropping journalism. She should also be able to say how Milena would feel if her application had not been rejected or if the newspaper had offered her another position.

Our understanding of others comes in degrees. How much information about another we have and understand can greatly vary. For example, when a stranger in the bus presses on the stop button, we understand that this person intends to go out at the next stop and that this is the reason why she pushed the button. However, we do not understand why she is getting out at that stop and what her further intentions are because we lack information about that person. Alternatively, we might have an extensive body of information but fail to completely grasp how the different parts hang together. For example, Sandrine might understand that Milena is very disappointed and depressed by the news, but she might not completely grasp why she is not angry at the newspaper. For Sandrine, the work Milena puts in her internship and her dedication to the journal are reasons to feel betrayed by the journal for rejecting her application. Our understanding of others thus varies according to its extension and to its depth.

This type of understanding of others is propositional. What is understood can be expressed in terms of propositions such as “I understand that you feel depressed”, “I understand why you want to stop trying to become a journalist”, etc. In this type of understanding, the experience of the other is apprehended and understood cognitively. For example, we might understand what emotion another person is experiencing, what it is about, and why she feels that emotions. However, the phenomenological dimension of the emotion, that is, the emotion as a feeling in the body, is not grasped.

If we do not grasp the phenomenology of experiences through propositions, we have other ways to access it. Affective empathy and perspective taking provide us with a highly useful, although imperfect, way of becoming acquainted with the phenomenology of another’s experience. Either by automatic affective empathy or by imagining that we are in the other person’s situation, we can come to feel what we take the other person to be feeling (Coplan 2011; Halpern 2001). For example, Milena can use her propositional understanding of Sandrine to run a simulation and imagine what Sandrine is feeling. She will then have a sense of how Sandrine feels about the rejection. We can also learn what it feels to be in a certain situation by experiencing it ourselves directly, or by remembering what it is like, if we have already had that experience. By being in the same situation as another ourselves,

imagining it, or remembering it, we can make experiences that are close or identical to another's and become acquainted with their phenomenological dimension.

I will call this type of understanding of another's mental state or perspective experiential understanding in opposition to propositional understanding. Experiential understanding might bring no further propositional understanding (but in some cases, it might; see [chapter 5 section 3](#)). If we had a perfect propositional understanding of the other person beforehand, no fact about her perspective is learnt through experiential understanding. The added understanding concerns only the qualitative aspect of her experience. Nevertheless, it is extremely important because it enables us to access an essential dimension of another's perspective. How it feels to us in our bodies to have pain, physical sensations (bright light, strong wind), and to feel emotions is often a very central part of our experiences. When Sandrine says that the rejection of her application is the ultimate blow that destroys her, the phenomenological aspect of her sadness is very much present and an important part of her experience. An accurate propositional and experiential understanding of another is thus more complete than a merely propositional understanding because it encompasses more dimensions of that person's perspective. As we will see in [chapter 4 section 4.2](#), this dimension also makes a big difference in the way we experience another and how we feel about her.

Unfortunately, there are limits to the experiential understanding that we can have of others. When we empathise, we experience what we take another person to be feeling and this can be quite different from what she is actually feeling, depending on how well we know that person, how well we understand her propositionally and how different we are from her. Thus, even if we might be under the impression that we feel what she is feeling, our experiential understanding can be quite inaccurate, since we are, in fact, projecting onto her what we take her to be feeling. In order to best understand someone, we thus need to keep this possibility in mind and, as Halpern says, have an "openness to ongoing feedback and correction" (Halpern 2001, 74). We need to check whether our experiential understanding is correct and adapt it to new information that we gather about the other. However, this is a problem that does not concern experiential understanding exclusively. Our propositional understanding of others can easily lack accuracy too. In fact, the accuracy of our experiential understanding will often depend on the accuracy of our propositional understanding. For example, if Milena mistakenly thinks that Sandrine is angry against the newspaper for unjustly rejecting her application, she can imagine how it feels to be in that situation and get a sense of it. However, since her propositional understanding of Milena is incorrect, the experiential understanding that she draws out of it can only be incorrect too (see also [chapter 5 section 5.3](#)).

Furthermore, we can wonder if it is even possible to imagine what it feels like to undergo an experience we have not had before. If this is the case, it would mean that our ability to

experientially understand others can be quite limited, depending on the range of experiences that we have had ourselves. This question will be addressed in chapter 5, [section 5.3](#) as well.

In conclusion, understanding someone propositionally consists in learning about that person's mental state(s) at a given time or about a given object, grasping how those mental states are related and as a result being able to explain them and predict the outcome of counterfactual scenarios. In addition to that, we can understand another experientially if we come to feel through simulation (or memory) what we take the other person to be feeling. As a result, we achieve an understanding of both the cognitive and affective/phenomenological aspects of the other's perspective.

#### *How do we come to understand others?*

There are different ways to pay attention to someone and to try to understand her. This can be done by observing someone and listening to what that person says, but it can also be done by reading someone's letter, advanced directives or autobiography, by watching a documentary on that person, or by discussing with someone who is very close and who can help us understand her. In [chapter 5](#), I describe in more length what it is to understand someone and how we come to understand someone once we know what state she is in and why. Here, I would like to address briefly the question of how we come to know what mental state someone is in by observation. We are often easily able to know that someone is sad or that someone is trying to open a bottle of wine simply by looking at them. How we go from observation to understanding, however, is the object of debate between proponents of three main types of theories: Theory Theory, Simulation Theory, and Direct Perception Theory.

Proponents of Theory Theory argue that as we grow up, we acquire a theory of mind, constituted by numerous folk-psychology laws, more or less implicit, that enable us to understand what mental states are and how they inform our behaviour. We can then attribute mental states to other people by applying those laws or principles to specific situations (Gopnik and Wellman 1992; Carruthers and Smith 1996). For example, a child might learn from experience that if an object is moved when someone is not looking, this person will not know where the object is and will look for it at the wrong place. Then, when the child's father takes the cookies away from the table, and puts them in the cupboard while the big sister is in the restroom, the child will attribute to her sister the belief that the cookies are on the table, and will predict that if her sister is looking for the cookies, she will first look for them on the table.

Simulation theories, by opposition, reject the claim that we need to theorise to understand others. Rather, they think that we use our own minds as a model for others' (Goldman 2002; Heal 2003; Gordon 1995). To know what someone's present mental state is and what her behaviour will be in a given situation, we can imagine being ourselves in that situation and see what we would think, feel, and do, and then project that onto the other person. For example, when Sandrine hears that Milena's application has been rejected, she can

imagine being in Milena's situation and see that she would feel disappointed, hopeless and perhaps also frustrated and angry. She will then attribute those feelings to Milena.

Lastly, direct perception theorists argue that we can, at least sometimes, directly perceive other people's mental states (Gallagher 2008; Zahavi 2011). They believe that the view that the minds of others are hidden behind their skull and that we have no access to them is mistaken. Rather, we are "directly acquainted with another person's joy in his laughter, with his sorrow and pain in his tears, with his shame in his blushing", etc. (Scheler 2017, 260). Thus, we do not always need a theory or simulation to identify other people's mental states and predict their actions. Often, we can directly know what someone is feeling or doing simply by looking at them.

All three theories seem to account for some cases of mental states attribution to others. When we are trying to understand what state someone is in, as in availability, we will often be doing one of the three. One of those three ways to learn about others' mental states might be more fundamental than others. There is a big debate regarding this question (Avramides 2019). To understand what being available consists in, it is nevertheless sufficient to know that we use those three ways to understand others, regardless of which is the most fundamental one.

#### *Relation with the four core features*

This aspect of the new definition – paying attention with the intention to understand – accounts for two of the four core features identified in [chapter 1](#): paying attention to that person, and trying to understand her and taking her perspective. In the new definition, those two aspects are fused into one. The rationale for that is that the paying attention and the trying to understand are not two actions that we perform at the same time when we are available but that are unrelated, as we can talk with someone while cooking or listen to the radio while driving. Rather, paying attention to someone is (partly) what we do when we try to understand that person. Furthermore, they are also related in that our aim of understanding that person guides our attention. If our aim is to draw someone, we will pay attention to that person by observing her, her posture, the details of her suit, the colour of her skin, etc. If our aim is to understand someone, we will pay attention to her differently, tracking facts that can help us know what mental state she is in and why. It thus makes sense to pair attention and trying to understand together. In fact, it is more precise to do so because it states what aim the process of attention is serving in availability.

### **2.2.3 The Valuing Motivates Attention**

In availability, the first condition (the valuing) motivates the second one (paying attention with the intention to understand). Many things can motivate us to pay attention to someone and to

try to understand her. For example, we might be motivated by our desire to help that person, to manipulate her, to discover her weaknesses, or to prove to ourselves that we are a good listener. When we are available to someone, what motivates us, however, is that we value that person. This does not mean that our valuing is our motivating reason for paying attention to that person, but that our valuing plays a causal role in our paying attention. This condition ensures that availability is disinterested. Because it is our valuing that motivates us to pay attention to the one we are available to, it follows that we are doing it for that person's sake.

#### *The Motivation in Detail*

That it is our valuing that motivates us does not mean that our valuing is our motivating or agential reason to pay attention to that person with the intention to understand her (Alvarez 2010; Sandis 2012a). We rarely pay attention to others in light of the fact that we value them, i.e. it is rarely the consideration that we value someone that motivates us to pay attention to that person, or to do anything for her. Considerations in light of which we pay attention to someone we value will more likely be along the following lines: "Something happened to that person," "She needs to talk to someone", or "Doing so will do her good", etc. Rather, the motivation of the valuing is understood here in a causal sense.

We saw earlier that valuing involves different dispositions, such as the dispositions to pay attention to the object of the valuing, to help her, to feel emotions and to consider certain considerations as reasons. Those dispositions are activated under the appropriate conditions if nothing prevents them from doing so. For example, when someone we value needs help, we are motivated to help; when someone we value is in a dangerous situation, we feel worried for her and when she comes out unharmed, we feel relieved; when she receives good news, we feel happy for her and are motivated to celebrate with her, etc. Under some conditions, the disposition to pay attention and to be interested by someone we value, and hence to try to understand that person, can be activated.

There are various conditions that can activate this disposition, such as that something good or bad has happened to the person we value, that we are in an ideal situation to learn more about someone we do not know well (we have time, we are in a calm environment), etc. The disposition to pay attention to someone will also be activated only if there is no more urgent matter or more important object to attend to and if the other person does not have a more urgent need that we can fulfil than the one to be attended to and understood. For example, if our friend went hiking and disappeared in the woods and we miraculously find her after two days, the disposition that will be activated will rather be the one to help our friend; we will give her water and call the emergencies, rather than ask her for a detailed account of what happened and how she has been feeling.

It is disputed whether in that case, it is the disposition to pay attention that causes the paying attention or whether there is another causal basis in the valuing (Alvarez 2017; Choi

and Fara 2018). It is, however, not necessary for our purpose to settle this issue. All we need is that there is something in the valuing of someone that causes us to pay attention to her with the intention to understand her, whatever in the valuing plays this causal role. We can understand that our valuing of someone, regardless what it is, that motivates us to pay attention to her and to understand her in the same way that a desire to enjoy the beautiful weather might motivate us to take our break in the park (Alvarez 2017).

More concretely, that the valuing motivates the paying attention means that, for example, if we value Mona and that we come across her in one of the hallways of the university and see that she looks really depressed and bothered, we will want to know what is going on with her and to be there for her. We might also see the fact that she does not seem to be well as a reason to offer her to have coffee and talk more. However, we see it as such only because we value her. If Mona was our lifelong enemy, we would probably not see the fact that she does not seem well as a reason to be interested in her, but rather as a reason to rejoice or to plan a strike against her while she is at her weakest. Therefore, even, if our valuing of another is not the reason in light of which we start paying attention to her with the intention to understand her, it plays a causal/motivating role in it.

This feature of availability ensures that it is disinterested, as put forth by the authors of [chapter 1](#). What I mean by that is simply that it is the value of the person we are available to that motivates us to understand her, rather than the value of something else, like the value of having that person think that we care about her, or of finding that person's weaknesses. This also implies that the reasons that we will see as speaking in favour of paying attention to that person and on which we will act will be reasons related to that person, to her situation and her needs, rather than to ourselves or another object. We will pay attention to Mona because she does not seem well, and not because we want to know about her sister or because we think that if we show deep care for her, she will eventually put us in her will.

This feature of availability is also important because it puts us in the best position to understand the person we are available to<sup>6</sup>. As explained above, our attention selects elements that are relevant to our priorities or to the task we are trying to do, in this case, understanding someone. If we are motivated by something other than our valuing of her, say the desire to find her weaknesses, this further aim will guide our attention. As a result, we will be in a better position to find that person's weaknesses than to understand her perspective. When we are available, however, we are motivated to understand that person for herself. No further aim is skewing our attention. This is why we are ideally positioned to understand her, and to know what she needs (see [chapter 4](#)).

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<sup>6</sup> By this, I mean that when we are available, we are ideally positioned to understand another and not that if we are not available, we are necessarily in a worse position. There are other attitudes than availability that can also put us in this ideal position (see chapter 4, [section 4.3](#)).

Nevertheless, valuing someone offers no guarantee that we will be motivated to pay attention to someone with the intention to understand her for herself. It is possible that the disposition to do so might not be activated or/and that another one is activated instead. For example, we might want to understand someone mainly to be able to help her. In that case, we will not be in the best position to understand her, unless we can momentarily forget about our aim of helping that person and focus on understanding her.

It is also possible that sometimes we have several motivations to pay attention to someone with the intention to understand her. For example, we might be genuinely interested in our grandmother, but we might also pay attention to her to help her, and also hope that when writing her will, she will remember that we have been visiting her every weekend. It is probable that such cases of multiple motivations are quite common, and it might be difficult to determine whether the valuing is the only motivation or not. As a result, requiring that the valuing of the other person be the one and only motivation to pay attention for availability might drastically restrict the possible cases of availability. This seems too restrictive and unnecessary. However, because the authors of [chapter 1](#) insisted that availability is disinterested and that when available, we are fully focused on the other person, it seems justified to require that the valuing be the main motivation, so that the paying attention is mainly disinterested. This would also ensure that we are in the best position to understand the person we are available to since we are mainly trying to understand her for herself. For these reasons, I will take the motivational condition of availability to be that when we are available, we are paying attention to someone with the intention to understand her *mainly* because we value her.

#### *Relation with the Four Core Features*

This motivational aspect of availability, together with the valuing one, accounts for the following core feature identified in [chapter 1](#): being motivated by care, love (or prizing). However, in the new definition of availability, the valuing is directly related to the paying attention, since this is what the valuing motivates. The new definition thus satisfies the objectives of defining availability in a way that clarifies how its components are related to each other.

### **2.2.4 Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for Availability**

The definition of availability that I offered is clear and concise. It satisfies the objectives of specifying the motivational element of availability as well as the relation between the elements of availability. This definition also refers to known processes and states of the mind (e.g. valuing, attention) which are already known and are currently the objects of empirical investigation. However, it is not clear yet that the definition sets necessary and sufficient conditions for availability. According to that definition, three conditions must be satisfied for one to be available. One must (1) value someone, (2) pay attention to that person with the

intention to understand her, (3) be motivated to pay attention by our valuing. Those conditions might not seem sufficient because they do not seem to account for one of the four core aspects of availability, the one of feeling empathy, sympathy, or compassion. It might also not be clear that those three conditions are necessary. We might think that if we value someone and are paying attention to that person to understand her, then, automatically, we are motivated by our valuing. In this section, I argue that in fact, those three conditions are necessary and sufficient for availability.

#### *Sufficient Conditions*

Sympathy, empathy, and compassion do not appear in the definition of availability although such an emotional attitude was identified as a core feature of availability at the end of [chapter 1](#). The reason for that is that, first, those emotional attitudes are involved in or implied by the other features of availability. Second, adding this core feature to the new definition would unnecessarily restrict the scope of availability.

To begin, let us consider empathy. By empathy, the authors presented in [chapter 1](#) probably meant affective empathy, that is, the experience of a feeling that one takes to be the one of another person (see chapter 3, [section 3.3.1](#)). For example, as Sandrine listens to Milena, she might come to feel her frustration, which she will identify as being Milena's and not her own. Some cases of empathy happen automatically when we pay attention to someone who is in an intense affective state (Preston and Waal 2002; Lamm, Batson, and Decety 2007). In other cases, empathy occurs when we try to understand someone experientially and take their perspective. For example, Sandrine might imagine what it is like for Milena to be in her situation and come to feel her frustration. As a result, being available often involves affective empathy.

In some situations, however, empathy might not be called for because the person we are trying to understand is not experiencing any particular emotion or sensation. As a result, if we make empathy a core feature of availability, the only difference it would make to availability is that it would restrict it to situations that can elicit empathy. This seems to be an unnecessary restriction of the scope of availability. First, there are situations where someone might be in need but have no particular emotion or sensation. The one in need might be in a coma, or the bad news that concerns her might not have been brought to her yet. If empathy is necessary for availability, then we cannot be available in such situations. Second, if availability does promote bonding and satisfying relationship, we have no reason at this stage to think that it does so only in situations that typically elicit empathy. In fact, we will see in [chapters 4 and 5](#) that availability also promotes bonding through understanding and not necessarily through affective empathy. Since availability involves empathy in situations that can elicit it, making empathy necessary to availability would unnecessarily restrict its scope. That is why I do not consider empathy to be a core feature of availability.

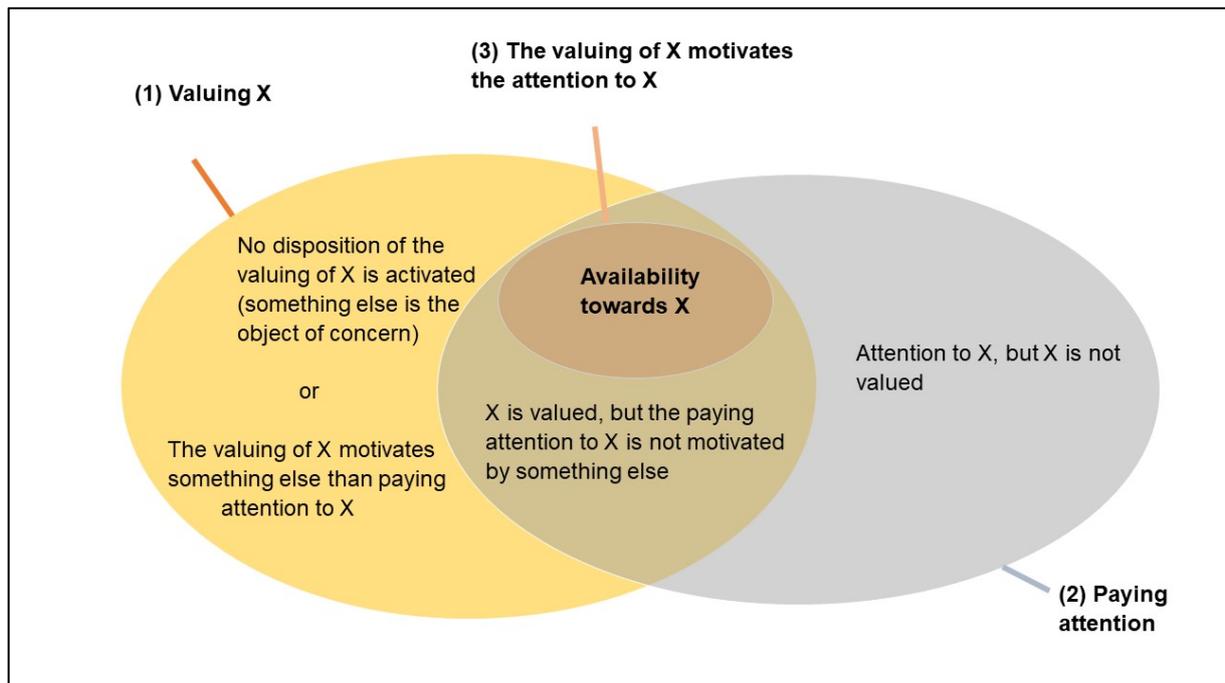
The case of sympathy is fairly similar. I take sympathy, also called empathic concern, to refer to a range of emotions that we have for others “from the perspective of ‘one-caring’” (Darwall 1998, 261; Batson 2011). We might feel worried for someone who is in danger, sorry for someone who has lost someone, happy for someone who just received some good news, etc. (see chapter 3, [section 3.3.2](#)). As explained earlier, the valuing of availability involves dispositions to feel such emotions. This implies that when we are available to someone, we will react emotionally to her situation. Sympathy is thus implied by the three conditions for availability. Again, if we make sympathy a necessary component of availability, it follows that we can be available only to people whose situations are not neutral and thus that prompt sympathy. Again, this seems an unnecessary restriction of the scope of availability, especially since it can deliver pro-social effects even in situations that do not invite sympathy. As we will see in [chapters 4 and 5](#), availability can help us bond with others even when their situations are rather neutral.

Third, we saw in [chapter 1](#) that some authors also mentioned compassion as a feature of availability. As I will explain in chapter 3 [section 3.3.5](#), compassion seems to be a type of sympathy. The rationale for not including compassion in the definition is the same as for sympathy. In [chapter 3](#), the phenomena of empathy, sympathy and compassion will be further described and their relations to empathy explored in more detail.

I thus disagree with the authors presented in [chapter 1](#) regarding the fact that empathy and sympathy are core features of availability. Those emotional attitudes are often experienced by the ones who are available because they are either involved in other features or implied by them. Because most of the examples of availability are ones where the object of availability is someone in need, we can see why they thought that empathy and sympathy are core features of availability. Because they are implied by other features of availability, they are, however, not core, but secondary features of availability. Making empathy and sympathy core features of availability would only have the undesirable effect of restricting its scope, which is unnecessary.

### *Necessary conditions*

The three conditions provided by the new definition are also necessary. I already explained how they account for the three other core features of availability than empathy and sympathy, which I just argued is not a core feature. Now, I would like to show that those three conditions are necessary because they are distinct from each other and each of them captures an essential aspect of availability. Even if it might seem at first sight that the conjunction of (1) and (2) necessarily implies (3), this is not the case. To show that, I will explain how the sets of situations that satisfy each condition are different from one another.



*Figure 1. Venn diagram of the three conditions for availability*

First, it is quite obvious that there can be instances of (1) that do not satisfy (2) and vice versa. For example, there are many cases where we value someone, but nonetheless are not paying attention to that person with the intention to understand her. We might value someone and be taking action to help that person. We might also value someone but be in a situation where someone else we value needs more attention. For example, a parent with two small children values them both, but might be paying attention and care for the baby as she is crying out of hunger, while letting the older one play with modelling clay. A spouse might find herself unable to pay attention to her partner because she is too exhausted from her day, etc. Reciprocally, we can find ourselves paying attention to someone with the intention to understand her although we do not value that person. A criminal lawyer might try to understand a serial killer in order to learn how to identify other serial killers or to prevent their next moves. A politician might try to understand her opponent to find her weaknesses and dominate her next debate against her.

There are also cases where both (1) and (2) are satisfied, but not (3). This can happen when we value someone, but nevertheless have another (main) motivation for paying attention to her with the intention to understand her. For instance,<sup>7</sup> a social scientist might be conducting interviews for a qualitative study on the experience of divorce. To carry out her scientific aim, she will have to try to understand the perspective of people who have recently divorced. The scientist might decide to include one of her friends who satisfies the inclusion criteria in the study. Her motivation for doing so is self-related; she wants to carry out her study and needs new inclusions. As she is interviewing her friend, however, she is likely to be touched by her friend's experience and she might find herself paying attention to her more because she values her than because she is trying to carry out her study. But this outcome does not seem necessary. If the friend is a distant one and the scientist is very ambitious and career oriented, she might be paying attention to her friend mainly because she is a subject of her study.

Let us consider this other case: a mother has a psychopathic son holding her hostage in the basement of her house. She sees that understanding her son's perspective is her only chance of making it out. Although she still values her son and could try to understand him for that reason, at this time, her main motivation for doing so is getting out of the basement alive. Even if such cases do not seem very common, they are nevertheless possible. To prevent such cases from qualifying for availability, the third condition has been added and is thus necessary to the definition of availability. This condition guarantees that when we are available, we are paying attention to another disinterestedly, because we value that person and not (mainly) for another reason.

However, since (3) specifies the relation between the two other conditions for availability, for (3) to occur, it is necessary that both (1) and (2) occur as well. It is thus not possible to have cases where (3) is satisfied although (1) or (2) is not. This is illustrated by the fact that the set of instances that satisfy (3) is within the intersection of (1) and (2). Availability is thus coextensive with (3).

The definition of availability provided above therefore provides us with necessary and sufficient conditions for it.

### **2.3 The Diversity of Availability**

In the previous section, I offered a new definition for availability, described each of its component precisely and argued for it. What has not come forth yet is the fact that availability can take many forms and vary tremendously according to situations. In this section, I would like to explore these aspects and see how availability varies in degrees, duration,

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<sup>7</sup> The two examples given here are inspired by the ones given in Malbois and Clavien, forthcoming.

phenomenology and depending on how we are related to the person we are available to. This will enable us to understand better what it means to be available in practice.

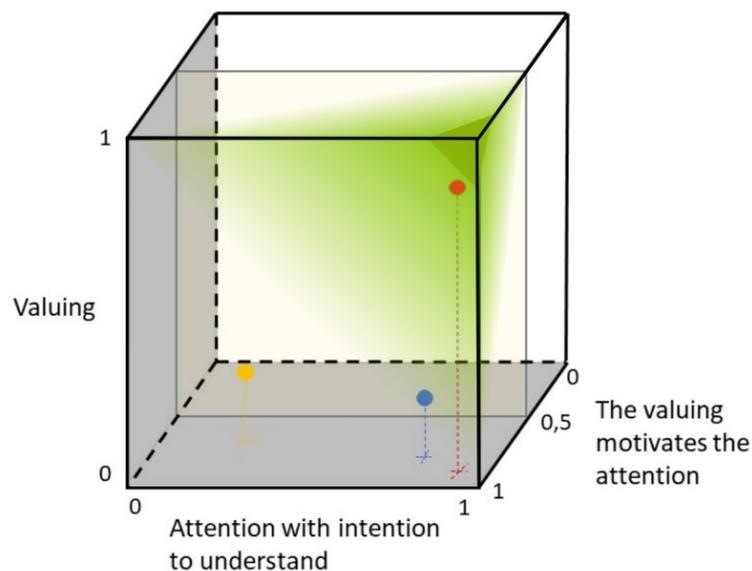
### **2.3.1 Availability Is Experienced in Degrees**

Availability is not an on/off attitude. It rather comes in degrees. As mentioned earlier, we can be more or less focused on someone and our valuing can vary in strength. Furthermore, the third feature of availability can also be taken to admit of degrees. Our valuing of another might be our sole motivation for paying attention to her or it might only partially motivate us, along with other conative states. In such cases, the degree of motivation can vary, depending on the strength of its motivating force compared to the other motivations. However, since in availability the valuing is the main motivation (see above [section 2.2.3](#)), it implies that the degree to which the valuing motivates the attention in availability is at least higher than 0.5 on a scale from 0 to 1.

The degrees to which each condition for availability is realised are not completely independent from each other. The degree to which we value someone might have an impact on how hard we try to understand her. It is likely that in general we try to understand people we love more than we try to understand people we respect solely for the sake of their humanity. Similarly, the scientist who tries to understand her best friend whom she included in her study is more likely to find herself paying attention to her friend mainly for her own sake, than if she was a stranger. However, as explained above, the degrees to which the second and third conditions for availability are satisfied also depend a lot on the context i.e. on what is stringent in a given situation.

The degree to which each condition is satisfied will determine the overall degree of availability. Figure 2 below illustrate the fact that each of them can be realised to a different degree. When the degrees of valuing or of attention are 0, then there is no availability (grey areas of the cube). Similarly, there will be availability only when (3) is realised at a higher degree than 0.5 (in front of the light grey panel). When each condition is realised maximally, or close to it, the degree of availability is maximal (green angle). In between, availability can have very different degrees. For example, as we see a shipwreck survivor speaking about her experience on TV, we might become available to that person. In that case, our valuing will be rather low, but we might be very interested in learning about that person's experience and our degree of attention can be high. In that case, our valuing of that person might be our main motivation, but we might also be motivated by sheer curiosity. This degree of availability is represented by the blue dot. If we are visiting our mother in the hospital after she had an accident and are concerned about how she is doing, our degree of availability will be closer to the red dot. Our valuing, our attention, and our motivation will probably be almost maximal. If

we become available to a stranger on the train with whom we are just talking about the weather or some other mildly significant matter, our degree of availability will be rather low. As we are chatting, we might also be thinking about the work that we are planning to do during the train ride, we do not value that person very much, and although we are interested in her, politeness also plays a big role in our motivation to pay attention to that person. Our degree of valuing will be closer to the yellow dot.



*Figure 2. Illustration of the possible degrees of availability depending on the realisation of each of the conditions for availability. The coloured dots represent different experiences of availability (see main text above). The green angle represents the highest degrees of availability. The grey areas represent cases where there is no availability because one of the conditions is not realised. The light grey panel in the middle of the cube represents the lowest limit of the realisation of condition (3). Cases of availability are situated in front of it, where the valuing of another is the main motivation to understand her.*

Experiences of availability can thus be quite different from each other. A form of availability where we value someone only weakly but are paying attention to her very intensely will contrast with another in which we passionately love someone, but only pay attention to that person remotely. However, it is important to see that even if all those forms of availability qualify as availability, not all of them will be effective or appropriate in a given situation (see also [chapter 4](#)). If we are available to someone and we want her to feel heard or understood as a result, then a low degree of attention might not give her this feeling or might be insufficient for us to understand her in complex social situations. Similarly, a mild degree of valuing perceived by a stranger might make her feel cared about, while the same degree of valuing perceived by your partner might frustrate her. It is even possible to be available at times that are uncalled for, e.g. when someone needs urgent help. Thus, availability should not be understood as “good” availability or “appropriate” availability.

### 2.3.2 Availability and Time

The definition of availability given above enables us to determine whether someone is available at a given time. Salma is thus available to Fatima at  $t_1$  if Salma satisfies the three conditions for availability at  $t_1$ , even if it is the only time she is ever available to Fatima. But it is clear from the description of availability given in [chapter 1](#) that availability is not something that is achieved in one moment, as spilling coffee might be. Rather, it seems to be a process, like making coffee. Paying attention to someone to understand her is something that takes time, especially if what is to be understood is complex. Understanding that someone has been injured and needs help might need a couple of seconds but understanding what a patient who has just learnt that she has multiple sclerosis is experiencing will not be achieved in such a short amount of time. Even if availability does not require successful understanding (see [section 2.4.1](#) below), the attempt to do so is a process that might take time.

Consequently, we might want to know what it means to be available to someone over a period of time. A logical answer would be to say that we are available over a period of time  $\Delta t$ , if we satisfy the three conditions for availability at every  $t$  of  $\Delta$ . But this seems too demanding. We can be very easily distracted. As we are paying attention to someone and trying to understand her, our attention might be caught by other stimuli (someone passing by, a dog barking, a stomach pain, etc.), other objects of concern of ours might pop up in our minds (what we have to do afterwards, did we lock the door?, etc.), or we might go off the track and find ourselves judging the person we are trying to understand (she should not have done that, that was stupid of her, etc.). In all those cases, we stop momentarily being available since we stop paying attention to the other with the intention to understand her. But such distractions are so common that if they put a decisive term to our availability, it would make it almost impossible for most of us to be available to others in normal environmental conditions.

Furthermore, if such events distract us for a very short amount of time, they do not necessarily threaten the overall process of trying to understand another. For example, as Sandrine is being available to Milena, someone in the café drops her cup, causing a sudden noise that attracts both Sandrine and Milena's attention. If, after a couple of seconds, they both come back to where they were before the distraction, and Sandrine is available again for a time, then it might seem that she was overall available, despite the small interruption. It is likely that frequent short distractions do not threaten the process of understanding another and do not prevent us from being available over time. If distractions are too frequent or lasts for too long, however, for example, if Sandrine takes a phone call, then, the overall process might be stopped or threatened because we are no longer able to try consistently pay attention to the other person with the intention to understand her.

We could set precise criteria to determine whether someone is available over time or not. For example, we could say that if an interruption lasts more than 5 seconds, then we have stopped being available. We could also say that if on average over a period of time there has been more moments of availability than unavailability, then we were overall available. However, such criteria would seem arbitrary since at the moment we have no reason, conceptual, or empirical, to accept them. We shall thus satisfy ourselves with a rather imprecise appreciation of whether someone was available over time depending on how distracted during that time she was.

In addition, another reason to keep the number of interruptions unspecified is that in some cases, short interruptions of availability can help the process of availability. If we are paying attention to someone with the intention to understand her, taking some time to assess our understanding, explaining to the target of availability what we have understood, or haven't, in order to check whether our understanding is correct or to gain new information to complete our understanding can be beneficial to the process itself. Such interruptions are thus no hindrance to availability.

Lastly, although this will be further discussed in [chapter 4](#), it is important to clarify that with availability, it is not necessarily the longer, the better. Some paradigmatic examples of availability such as the one of the psychotherapist or of the friends who needs to talk, might have given us the impression that availability is something that lasts, or should last, for a long time to be effective and that we prove ourselves available only if we are available during the whole meeting. This might be true in some cases, but often, it will not. For example, availability might be needed in order to understand someone and know how to help that person best. In that situation, it is possible that 10 minutes will be sufficient to understand that person. In that case, the rest of the time can be dedicated to finding a solution to that person's problem or to provide her help. Similarly, when Sandrine meets with Milena, Milena might not want to speak about her and think about her difficult situation for a long time. After a while, she might want to hear about Sandrine, and become available to her, or speak about something else. Thus, availability is a process that develops over time. But it is not true that we have been available to another only if we have realised the three features of availability at every moment, or at most of them, of the encounter with another. We might have been available only during a small portion of the encounter, but if that was when availability was needed, then this small moment of availability might have been very effective.

### **2.3.3 The Relation with the Object of Availability**

In most examples of availability, either given by me or by the authors presented in [chapter 1](#), the person who is available to another is face-to-face with the person she is available to, they

are in a relationship, and the recipient of availability expects, or needs, availability from the other person. However, this certainly does not need to be the case. There is nothing in the description of availability that requires such a relationship setting. Firstly, we do not need to be in a relationship with the person we are available to. We do not need to know that person beforehand and for her to know us. We can be available to people who are not friends, nor colleagues, nor in any way related to us. For example, we can meet someone at a wedding, be available to her at a given time during the dinner, and never see that person ever again.

Secondly, we do not even need to interact with the person we are available to. She does not need to be aware that we are paying attention to her and trying to understand her. For instance, we can overhear someone speaking about herself in the train and become available to her. We can value minimally that person and be motivated to understand her for herself without her being cognisant of it.

Thirdly, we do not need to be face-to-face with the person we are available to. We could be available to a friend while talking to her through the phone or by texting her. We can be available to someone who is speaking about herself on television or on a podcast. As stated above, there are other ways to pay attention to someone than by observing them. Our attention can be focused on someone and looking for relevant facts that will help us understand her through many different ways. Reading a biography or learning about someone through a third party can also be ways to be available.

Because the valuing of availability can be very minimal and the second feature leaves open how we are paying attention to another and trying to understand her, it follows that availability can take very different forms. Although the face-to-face encounter with a close one might remain the paradigmatic example of availability, there are many other configurations possible. Of course, we could have added a further condition for availability so that only face-to-face encounters or interactions with others count as cases of availability. But this would have, again, unnecessarily restricted the scope of availability. While it is doubtful that being available can help us develop a satisfying relationship with someone if we are not interacting, it is more likely that it can motivate us to produce effective helping actions in such cases. A lot of people who need help are not in front of us and not interacting with us. If availability can have a pro-social effect even in those situations, then it is best to allow for it. The fact that the scope of availability is wider than we might have thought is thus good news for my project.

### **2.3.4 The Phenomenology of Availability**

Instances of availability can thus vary tremendously. Depending on how we are paying attention to the person we are available, on the shape of our availability, on how we satisfy each condition, and on the duration of our availability, our experience of availability can feel

very different. Furthermore, what it feels like to be available to another, and especially what emotions we will experience, are partly determined by the situation of the person we are available to. If the person we are available to is feeling depressed and is in a very difficult situation, we will feel concerned or sorry for her, whereas if she is extremely happy and has the best life possible, we will rather feel very happy for her. Similarly, the experience of understanding another experientially depends on that person's experience. It might involve feeling pain, doubt, or elation. As a result, although all instances of availability satisfy the three conditions for availability, they can be fleshed out in an array of different ways so that there is not one feeling that is characteristic of the experience of availability.

## **2.4 Further Questions Regarding Availability**

In this section, I would like to further our understanding of availability by first inquiring about what kind of thing availability is and then by asking who can be available and to whom. The aim in answering those last two questions is to identify more precisely the constraints that the above definition of availability puts on what type of beings can be available and can be the object of availability and thus to further specify the scope of availability. The answer to all three questions will provide us with a better understanding of the satisfaction conditions for availability.

### **2.4.1 Availability as an Action**

Now that we have described availability, we should be in a good position to say what kind of thing it is. Authors presented in [chapter 1](#) mostly took availability to be an attitude in the general sense of the term, that is, as a state. This suggested that availability is a mental state, or a complex mental state. I will argue that availability is rather an action, but a mental one, hence the tendency to consider it as a state. After that, I will explore the satisfaction conditions of availability and argue that successfully understanding another is not a satisfaction condition of availability.

#### *Availability is a mental action*

To show that availability is a mental action, we have to face two difficulties. First, there is no consensual definition of actions. Second, the topic of mental actions has surprisingly been neglected in philosophy of mind and what mental actions are is even less clear. My aim here is not to argue for an account of actions or mental actions, but to provide reasons to think that availability is an action by showing that it has features that are commonly considered to be core features of actions. I will then argue that if availability is an action, we have good reasons to think it is a mental one.

Let us start with the reasons to think that availability is an action. The first reason is that it is intentional. Following Davidson, many philosophers consider that what characterises actions is that they are intentional at least under some description (Davidson 1970; Proust 2001; Mele 2009). My fainting is not an action because it is not intentional, while my walking to my office is. It is something that I do, as opposed to something that happens to me (Wilson and Shpall 2016). Similarly, availability is not something that merely happens to us, but something that we do intentionally. As we are available, we are paying attention to another with the intention to understand that person. We are trying to bring about that we understand her. Although sometimes, our attention is attracted by certain stimuli in our environment without it being intentional, as we automatically turn our attention to a sudden loud noise, the case of availability is different. As we have described it earlier, when we are available to another, it is our valuing of that person that motivates us to pay attention to her. Because we value this person, we are interested in her and desire to understand her. We then form the intention to understand that person and we start paying attention to her as a way to reach that goal. The fact that availability is directed at a goal that we are trying to bring about is another commonly accepted feature of actions (Proust 2001; Mele 2009).

Furthermore, actions are taken to be “sensitive to reasons” which means that we are “able to adjust flexibly its means and goals to varying constraints or opportunities” (Proust 2010, 209-10). For example, going grocery shopping is something that we decide to do based on the considerations that our refrigerator is empty and that we want to cook dinner tonight. If it was not empty, we would not go grocery shopping. By opposition, sneezing or having the flu is usually not responsive to reasons. Their happenings do not depend on us becoming aware of certain considerations speaking in favour of them. Availability is, however, sensitive to reasons. If someone we value is having a heart attack, we will call for emergency assistance rather than pay attention to this person with the intention to understand her. Whether we become available to someone depends on our assessment of the situation and of the reasons it provides us.

Actions can also typically be meaningfully tried and involve effort to perform them (Proust 2001; Mele 2009). Although the trying test is not always conclusive, that something can be meaningfully tried can be a good indication that it is an action. As it happens, we can meaningfully try to be available. We can try to pay attention to someone and to remain focused on that person. And when we are available to another, we are certainly trying to understand that person.<sup>8</sup> Those are good reasons to think that when we are available, we are doing something, and we are trying to bring something about.

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<sup>8</sup> It is possible that understanding someone is a state rather than an action. But even if that is the case, it does not prevent the trying to understand another (by paying attention to her) to be an action

Lastly, actions are often characterised by the fact that we have some control over them (Wu 2013). Because of this, automatic processes are not actions. When the doctor hits our knee with her reflex hammer and our foot moves up, it is not an action, but a reflex. When we decide to raise our hand to ask a question at a conference, however, we have (at least some) control over that movement. When we are available, we have some control over what we are doing, especially on the way we go about to understand the other person. We intentionally do things to pay attention to the other person and to try to understand her. For example, we might turn our head towards that person, ask her questions, observe her, put the volume of the TV up, look for a book in the library, etc., depending on the situation. We can also intentionally try to block obstacles and “other possible goal-directed behaviours” (Proust 2001, 109). In order to be available to someone, we might have to stop something that we were doing or change our plans for the near future. We might also try to disregard distractions and might even act to block them (e.g. turning the phone off).

Availability is thus quite a good candidate for being an action. But why shall we think that it is a mental one? I will follow Proust who argues that an action is mental if its “goal ... [is] confined to some mental-representational property” (Proust 2001, 107). On that understanding, availability is a mental action because its aim (understanding the other person) is a mental state. By opposition, trying to score a goal while playing football or showing someone that her argument is invalid are not mental actions because the aims we want to achieve are not mental properties. Note that on that understanding of mental action, it is not necessary that the way to bring the aim about is purely or mainly mental itself. Being available can involve going to the library to find a book about this person, asking questions, changing seat, etc.

What count as a mental action is quite debated. There is quite a lot of disagreement on whether judging is a mental act, but also on remembering and imagining (O’Brien and Soteriou 2009). Paying attention is, however, often taken to be the paradigmatic example of a mental action (Proust 2001; Wu 2013). Arguing that availability is a mental action is, therefore, not a controversial claim. However, availability is not a fundamental mental action, as imagining could be (if it is indeed mental action). That means that we have not discovered a “new” structure of our minds. Rather, availability is a complex mental action. It is a particular way of paying attention to another. It is particular in that it is done with a precise intention: understanding that person – in the same way as trying to remember 7 animal names that start with a “g” is a particular way of trying to remember something.

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(Wu 2013). In a similar vein, Mele argues that remembering 7 animal names that start with “g” is not an action but trying to do so is. See Mele 2009.

The fact that availability is an action might seem at odds with many descriptions of availability as a way of being, and as an attitude rather than as an action (see [chapter 1](#)). This discrepancy can be explained in different ways. First, although availability might in some cases require bodily movement (turning our head, going to the library, etc.), availability often just requires sitting still. This might have given the impression that availability is a state. Second, as some authors have pointed out, there is something receptive or passive in availability. When we are available, we are not trying to make a change in the external world. Rather, we are receiving and computing data from the external world. Often, when we are available, we are listening to or observing someone. Because of this, some might have thought that being available is similar to being a blank canvas waiting to be painted on. Even if we have to be active in order to pay attention and try to understand someone, it is possible that by describing it as an attitude, some authors wanted to stress this passive or receptive aspect of availability and distinguish it from situations where we are trying to convince other people or make them do something, for example. Third, the general sense of the term attitude refers to “a feeling or opinion about something or someone, or a way of behaving that is caused by this” (« Attitude Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary » s. d.). Availability can be considered as a way of being or behaving towards someone caused by a valuing of that person, and thus as an attitude. Nevertheless, if we want to characterise availability more precisely and describe its place in the typology of the mind, we find that availability is rather a mental action.

#### *The Satisfaction conditions of availability*

Now that we have discussed what kind of entity availability is, we can specify its satisfaction conditions. It seems hard to set non-redundant conditions. For example, it seems that we win a race, if we win that race, and we are reading a book if we are reading a book. Obviously, we are available to someone if we are paying attention to her with the intention to understand her and that our valuing of this person motivated us to do so.

As defined here, availability is an activity that we do, i.e. a process such as taking a walk or enjoying the beautiful weather. We might wonder if availability is not rather an accomplishment such as reading a book or baking a cake. Unlike taking a walk, reading a book is an activity that has an objective, which, when achieved puts the process to a term (Soteriou 2007). It seems that availability has such an endpoint: the understanding of the person we are available to. Understanding someone is the aim that we have when we are available to her. Furthermore, once we have understood someone, there is, in theory, no need to pay attention to that person with the intention to understand her any longer.<sup>9</sup> In addition, all the examples considered by the authors presented in [chapter 1](#), were cases where availability

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<sup>9</sup> It is debatable whether we can ever understand another person completely in practice, since we are such complex beings. Furthermore, what we think and feel continuously evolves, so that if we are face to face to someone, there is continuously more to understand.

successfully leads to an accurate understanding of the other person. Lastly, as we will see in [chapter 4](#), availability has positive effects only when it issues a correct understanding of the other person. We can thus wonder why I have defined availability rather as an activity.

The first reason is that even if authors presented in [chapter 1](#) only considered cases where availability leads to a successful understanding of the other person, they described availability as something that we are doing or as a state we are in. They did not characterise availability in terms of its outcome. Availability was described as a certain way of being towards another (paying attention, trying to understand, feeling sympathy, etc.) and whether someone is available or not at a given time did not seem to depend on what happens at a later time.

The second reason is that by defining availability as the activity of paying attention with the intention to understand rather than as the accomplishment of understanding another, it makes it more actionable. Whether we can successfully understand another person does not only depend on the agent's ability to pay attention to another and on how hard she tries to understand another. It also depends on us having a reliable source of information, us having had relatable experiences, etc. (those success conditions are discussed in [chapter 4 section 4.4](#)). If we do not have a reliable source of information, for example, if the other person does not want to share, even if we are perfectly available to her, we will not be able to understand her. By saying that availability consists in paying attention to another with the intention to understand her, we make availability about what an agent can do.<sup>10</sup> Availability is then an activity that an agent can perform that optimises the chances of understanding another person (see [chapter 4](#)) and not an outcome that she might sometimes be unable to reach.

Furthermore, if we defined availability in terms of successful understanding, we would need to specify what such a successful understanding is. As we will see in more detail in [chapter 5](#), understanding admits of degrees, we can partially understand someone's reasons for acting, for example. Understanding can also vary in width. We can understand someone's mental states, but not why she believes she has certain reasons for holding that mental state. For instance, I can understand that someone takes an umbrella because she believes it is raining, but I might not understand why she believes it is raining since I can see the sun shining. We could say that we are available only when we reach a complete and extensive understanding of another, but that would make it far too demanding. Because we are complex beings, we can doubt that this is ever possible. It would also make availability almost impossible to test empirically, because it is not clear how we could verify that someone has a complete and extensive understanding of another. Alternatively, if we defined availability in terms of partially successful understanding, we would have to settle a minimal threshold of

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<sup>10</sup> Whether availability can be simply willed is a question that will be addressed in chapter 6, [section 6.3.2](#).

understanding that qualifies availability. It is not clear that we can find such a threshold that is satisfying for all types of situations and again, it would make the application of availability very complicated. I have thus chosen to define availability as an activity rather than as an accomplishment to keep it as actionable as possible.

The satisfaction conditions for availability are therefore the following: we are available to another person if we manage to pay attention to this person with the intention to understand her (i.e. we are trying to understand this person) and we are doing it for the sake of the other person (i.e. are motivated by a valuing of that person), whether or not we come to a satisfactory understanding of that person.

### **2.4.2 Who Can Be Available?**

The point of this section is to see what constrains availability sets regarding who can be available. Up until this point, examples of availability have been such that a human adult was available to another human adult. But this certainly is not the only configuration possible. We can then wonder what criteria one must satisfy in order to be able to become available to another. In particular, we can wonder if, in order to understand another, we have to be at least potentially able to understand the target of availability and thus have cognitive abilities at least as developed as the recipient of availability. In this section, I discuss what criteria one must satisfy to be able to be available, but not what group of individuals or species can satisfy them. Although this question is interesting, it is a complex one which will not help us understand availability better.<sup>11</sup>

The most important constrains that availability seems to set regarding who can be available is the fact that we must be able to see that another being is a subject with mental states distinct from our own. This requires advanced cognitive abilities. The valuing aspect of availability is not especially demanding since it only involves a seeing something as good. It does not require propositional attitudes. However, the fact that availability involves a valuing of another “for herself” might be demanding. It requires the ability to see value in an object independently from our needs. Furthermore, we can wonder whether it is possible to have the intention to understand an object without being able to hold propositional attitudes. This seems possible. For example, some animals are surprised when we perform magic tricks in front of them which might show that they do not understand and are looking for an explanation. Our description of what it means to understand another might then need to be adapted to encompass a form of non-propositional understanding.

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<sup>11</sup> To have a broad idea of which species can be available, read Batson 2011, 37 sqq. He has explored this question for empathic concern which has cognitive requirements that are quite similar to the ones of availability.

An important question that needs to be addressed is the following: how extended must our abilities to understand others be in order to be available to them? It might seem to us that a being that does not have the cognitive ability to comprehend our complex perspective and our experience even in ideal conditions cannot be available to us. I claimed in the last section that availability does not require a successful understanding of the object of availability. We might nevertheless think that a successful understanding must be at least possible. A two- or three-year-old child can understand that we are distressed, but she might not grasp the object of our distress, for example, that we have no money to pay the bills. A member of an isolated indigenous tribe might also not be able to understand the object of our distress. Also, can we understand what a tortoise with a broken shell is experiencing? Is availability in such cases possible?

We might think that beings that cannot understand us cannot be available to us because there are little chances that we can feel understood by them and bond with them or that the being that is available to us can be of any help, since she does not completely understand us. We might be tempted to restrict availability to cases where it can at least potentially be efficacious. However, this would make availability extremely demanding, because it is not clear that we can potentially completely understand any other human being. It might imply, for example, that we cannot be available to a creationist, for example, because we are not able to completely understand his position (see [chapter 5](#)). Furthermore, even if some beings are not able to understand what it means that have no money to pay our bills, they can perhaps understand what it means for us to be hungry, to be in pain, to desire safety, etc., and their availability towards us might be still efficacious in some cases. In order to keep availability an applicable notion and its scope as wide as possible, we should therefore not consider that in order to be available we must at least be able to understand the recipient.

### **2.4.3 To Whom Can We Be Available?**

I defined availability as a mental action that has another person as an object. This raises several questions. First, can only and all human beings be the object of someone's availability? Second, can we be available only to one individual at a time or can we be available to a group of people?

The definition of availability itself sets few constraints regarding the potential objects of availability. The object must be such that we can potentially value it. If it is possible to value an individual simply because she is a sentient being, then all sentient beings can be objects of availability. This does not imply that any of us could be available to any sentient being. For each of us, what we can be available to depends on what we personally find valuable. For example, Elisabeth might not think that being sentient or human comes with any moral value

and be unable to value a mass murderer. It also seems that we can pay attention to any sentient being with the intention to understand her. In practice, we might need to think that we do not understand a being completely to be motivated to pay attention with the intention to understand her. In theory, we can be available towards anyone. This means that the scope of availability is wide enough to encompass all beings that could potentially need help.

Of course, we could pay attention to an object that is not a sentient being with the intention to understand her because we value her. There are many inanimate objects that we value for themselves, such as works of art and landscapes. We can be interested in them and want to understand them better. Availability towards other people can be considered as one type of availability, and other types could be considered and studied. This is in line with Marcel's work, since he thought that we can be available to other types of objects, such as life in general (Marcel 1999). However, our interest in availability stemmed from the consideration that it might be central to our social lives and that it enables us to develop good relationships with others and to help them efficiently. Within this scope, it makes sense to restrict the potential objects of availability to sentient beings and to take human beings as the paradigmatic object of availability.

Furthermore, can we be available to several people at a given time? First, we should distinguish between availability to several people considered as a unified group or as distinct individuals. In the first case, we are still available to a single object, although a general one, because the group is considered as a single entity. In the second case, considered below, we are available to several persons individually at the same time.

We will consider availability to a group of people first. We can certainly value a group of people, such as Afro-Americans or people from a certain countryside, in the sense that, in general, we value the people who belong to that group (and not the grouping itself). We can pay attention to that group and try to understand its members' needs, experiences, perspective, etc. In that case, the object of our understanding is what the members of that group have in common, for example, being discriminated, being well-off, not having enough food, etc. Being available to a group in that way can potentially help us develop relationships with its members and motivate us to produce effective helping actions. For example, being available to a group of people whose village has been destroyed by an earthquake can help us see what those people, in general, need, such as food or clean water and allow us to find a practical way to help them. For this reason, groups should not be discarded from potential objects of availability, it would contravene my objective of keeping the scope of availability as wide as possible. There is, however, a limitation to being available to a group of people. Because we can understand only what the members share, the bigger the group and the less understanding of them we can potentially gain.

Availability towards several distinct individuals is different because in that case, we are trying to understand several persons in their individuality at the same time. No generalisation is being made. Our attention can certainly be occupied by several objects we value (Watzl 2017, 87). For example, a parent might be watching over her two children at the same time. However, it is often quite difficult for us to try to understand several persons at the very same time. Depending on the situation, the effort to try to understand another will be too cognitively demanding to be able to try to understand another person at that very same moment. We can more easily be available to several people over a given period, by being available to each one of them alternatively. For example, Franck can be meeting up with Tina and Maya and have an animated conversation with them. He is trying to be available to both of them. He values them both and alternatively pays attention to Tina with the intention to understand her and alternatively to Maya. Who he is paying attention to depends, mainly, on who is speaking at that time. Although at each moment, he is either available to one or the other (or not available at all), broadly considered, he is available to both of them during the course of their meeting. By distributing his availability to both of them, he can certainly come to understand each of them better and develop a better relationship and, perhaps, figure out how to help each of them.

Availability to several individuals at the same time thus seems possible. However, the more people we are available to at a given moment or over a period and the less we can be available to each of them. In some complex situations, this might impede on the effects of availability. For example, if we are trying to be available to more than five persons, if each of them has a very complex perspective that cannot be so easily understood and if we have only 20 minutes with all of them, we might not be able to come to a precise understanding of each of them.

To conclude, there are many possible objects of availability, but the ones that are more relevant for the purpose of this dissertation are sentient beings in general, and especially human beings. Furthermore, we can be available to several people at the same time, considered as a group or individually, although it might impede on the effectiveness of availability.

## **2.5 Old vs. New Description of Availability**

Coming to the end of the description of availability as per the new definition provided in the beginning of the chapter, it is time to take stock and to see how different or close availability as defined in this chapter is compared to how the authors of [chapter 1](#) conceived of it. As the table below illustrates, although very different in form, the new conception of availability is in fact quite close to the one that emerged in [chapter 1](#). Most features are retained as being either

core features of availability or effects of it. Only two features are rejected. In the section below, I briefly come back to each feature discussed in [chapter 1](#) to see how they can be taken to describe availability (or not).

		Aspect of availability	Availability according to the new definition
Lower-level components	Cognitive components	Attention	Condition 2
		Selflessness	Implied
		Disinterested	Implied
		Seeing through the eyes of the other	Condition 2 (part of the understanding)
	Affective components	Sympathy	Effect
		Motivated by love/care	Condition 1 (valuing)
Higher-level components		Acceptance	Not a component nor an effect
		Non-interference	Not a component nor an effect
Consequences		see the other as a subject	Implied (see <a href="#">chapter 5</a> )
		Seeing justly	Not addressed here
		Receptive attitude	Yes, if understood as mind-to-world direction of fit
Other aspects		Availability and the will	Partly dependent on the will (see <a href="#">chapter 6</a> )
		Availability as a moment	Availability is needed for a limited amount of time

Table 2. Table showing which feature of availability identified in chapter 1 is implied by the new definition of availability provided above.

*Features already discussed*

The new conception of availability is obviously very close to the one presented in the [previous chapter](#) since it retained three of the four core features identified. I explained above why the definition that I have provided slightly differ from it (why it involves valuing rather than care or love, and why sympathy is not a core feature) and will not come back to those points. Similarly, “availability as a moment” or the fact that availability is important at certain moments only was addressed above in the [section 2.3.2](#).

The two features of selflessness and disinterestedness are also implied by the new definition. When we are available, we have our attention focused on the person we are

available to and are thus not (mainly) preoccupied with ourselves (selflessness). Since we are paying attention to another for her own sake and are interested in her for herself, we are also disinterested.

### *Features to discuss*

#### i. Acceptance

The feature of acceptance was described mainly by Rogers and we saw that for him, it involved two things: first, a “prizing” of the other person (Rogers 1961, 62), which he also describes as “unconditional positive regard” (Rogers 1961, 62). The valuing component of availability as defined here implies that there is such a positive regard. However, it does not imply that it is unconditional. For it to be part of availability, it would require that we value the person we are available to no matter what she does, says, or thinks. This is a very strong condition that would substantially restrict the extension of availability. Because we want a concept of availability that can be widely applied and to a large range of situations, this further requirement shall be rejected.

Second, acceptance according to Rogers involves being non-judgemental. This can be understood in two ways. Being non-judgemental could be understood as having a neutral stance towards another and as the absence of evaluative conative states. This is not compatible with availability, since it involves a valuing of the person who is its object. Alternatively, being non-judgemental can be understood as the absence of evaluative judgements. It is clear that when we are available to someone, judgements can come up. When Sandrine is being available to Milena, she can make the judgement that Milena should be angry against her superiors at the newspaper and then try to understand her further. Valuing someone does not prevent us from forming judgements about her, either positive or negative and some are likely to come to our minds when we are available over a period of time. Those judgements can occur without us actively trying to form an opinion on the other person. It is unlikely that being available makes us unable to judge others. Alternatively, the claim that availability is non-judgemental could be understood as follows: at a precise moment, if we are actively paying attention to someone with the intention to understand her, we cannot be doing something else at the same time, such as judging that person. But again, considering the pervasiveness of multitasking, this claim seems unlikely to be true. Perhaps future research will prove otherwise, but in all likelihood, it seems that being available does not prevent us from judging others.

#### ii. Non-interference

Most authors considered in [chapter 1](#) thought that when we are available to someone, we see that she is a distinct being from us with her own perspective on the world, and that we respect that and refrain from interfering with her actions. Does the new definition of availability

imply non-interference? It is possible that availability makes non-interference more likely. Through availability, we can come to better understand someone's perspective and her reasons to act in a certain way that might have been inaccessible before. By coming to understand why someone is doing something, for example, we might come to understand why this is a good thing for her to do and have no reason left to interfere. Similarly, if we think that self-determination is a core aspect of our wellbeing, then when we value someone and thus desire her wellbeing, we will have a reason to respect that person's autonomy, because we will think that this is what is best for her.

Nevertheless, availability does not seem to necessarily lead to non-interference. We can value someone, try to understand her, and as a result, judge that it is best to interfere with that person's actions and do so. Someone might endanger herself in a way she is not aware of. Even when she is aware of it, we might prefer interfering with her. For example, as Sandrine is available to Milena, she discovers that Milena has decided to kill her boss as revenge for not hiring her. Even if Sandrine is or was available to Milena, she will probably do something to interfere with Milena's plans to kill her boss, if only for Milena's sake. There is no reason to think that availability towards someone comes with an absolute respect for that person's autonomy regardless of the situation. Hence, non-interference does not seem to be a direct effect of availability.

### iii. Receptive attitude

When I discussed this feature of availability in [chapter 1](#), I concluded that it did not seem to characterise availability further than the other features identified. This feature can be understood as the fact that when we are available, we are trying to understand another, and to do that, we are, in a way, collecting data by listening, observing, etc. At the moment when we are available, we are not trying to change the world or to put our mark in it, but rather to understand it as it is. In that sense, availability does involve something receptive. Unlike many actions (writing a paper, doing the grocery shopping), the aim of availability is not to make the external world as we want it to be, but rather to have an understanding of it that matches reality. The direction of fit is inverted; it is mind-to-world. If this is what is meant by receptive attitude, then it seems indeed that availability involves something receptive.

### iv. Remaining features

We still have to discuss whether availability towards someone involves seeing that person as a subject. This question will be discussed in [chapter 5](#). The one regarding whether availability can be willed or not will also be discussed at a later stage, in [chapter 6](#). Lastly, the feature \*seeing justly\* will not be considered here. If seeing justly is understood as seeing accurately or correctly, then availability involves no such thing. We can pay attention to someone with the intention to understand her because we value her and yet, find ourselves

unable to understand that person or even misunderstand that person. If seeing justly is understanding as seeing in a way that is just, then it is a normative question. My aim here being essentially descriptive, this question will have to be addressed at another time.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have offered a new definition of availability that is based on the description of availability given by the authors of [chapter 1](#) but that is more precise and that specifies the structure of availability. I have described the components of availability in detail and have been able to explore varieties of availability in terms of degrees, length and relation to the object. I have also investigated the scope of availability and its ontological status. Now that we have a clearer idea of what availability is, we can delve into the questions of its effects and see if its merits are confirmed. Before that, I would like to further our understanding of availability by comparing it to other closely related notions with which it could be confused. The following chapters will also provide us with the opportunity to test the new definition of availability and see if it is precise enough to distinguish it from those other notions and to identify its effects. [chapter 6](#) will rather test whether the definition can be taken as a basis for empirical research.

### 3. Availability, Empathy, and Other Concepts

The concepts of empathy, sympathy, compassion, care, respect, and the like, appear closely related to availability. It seems likely that when we are available, we also present those other attitudes. It might even seem that availability involves or even amounts to some of those concepts. For example, isn't availability a form of respect? In order to have a precise and clear understanding of what availability is, it is important to distinguish it from those other concepts and to clarify how it is related to them, if it is. The aim of this chapter is to draw a concept map of those notions in order to see what place each of them occupies. To accomplish this, I need to define each of the related concept. The difficulty in carrying this task is that there is little consensus on a definition for any of the concepts, and much verbal dispute around some of them, like empathy and sympathy. My aim here is not to argue for a definite understanding of any of the concepts presented here, but rather to identify what seems to be their main features in order to see what their specificity is. This nevertheless gives this chapter a more general conceptual value. It clarifies those concepts by showing that they are connected by different types of relations – a fact often overlooked.

The conceptual work done in this chapter will enable us to see that some concepts such as cognitive and affective empathy are directly related to, or even involved in availability, because they refer to processes used to understand another person ([second condition for availability](#)). Other concepts, such as care and sympathy, are indirectly related to availability because they share a common feature: the valuing of their objects ([first condition for availability](#)). Availability nevertheless distinguishes itself from the other concepts of the same semantic field by its unique combination of cognitive and conative components.

I will begin by identifying the concepts that should be considered in this chapter before providing a concept map showing how they are all related. After that, I will explain what we learn from this map and how availability fits into it. Then, I will go into more detail and attempt to define each of those concepts and describe precisely how they are different and/or related to availability.

#### 3.1 Selecting the Relevant Concepts

The first step to see how availability is related and different from relevantly close concepts is to identify those concepts. It is relevant to compare availability with the concepts that belong to the same semantic field and share some important characteristic(s) with it. First, availability is an other-oriented phenomenon, which means that it is directed towards another person.

While availability might be confused with other-oriented phenomena, it is clearly distinct from attitudes directed towards ourselves or towards other objects such as shame, regret and avidity. It is thus relevant to compare availability with other other-oriented phenomena. Second, availability is positive or pro-social, since it involves a valuing of another person. Because of this, availability will also be easily and clearly distinguished from attitudes that involve a negative evaluation of others, such as vengeance and schadenfreude. For this reason, only positive or pro-social phenomena will be considered relevant. Furthermore, the understanding of others (or the attempt to do so) is an important aspect of availability. It might be useful to compare availability with other concepts that refer to processes used to understand others. Lastly, we will only discuss concepts that have attracted a significant amount of attention and that are currently discussed in order to clarify the current debate and to position availability in it. Concepts such as benevolence and charity are relevant to the semantic field of availability but have been left aside because they are usually ignored in the current philosophical discussions. As a result, the concepts that will be discussed in this chapter are the following: empathy, sympathy, compassion, pity, care, respect, love, and altruism. It is important to note, however, that this list does not have the pretension to be comprehensive.

### 3.2 Conceptual Mapping of the Relevant Concepts

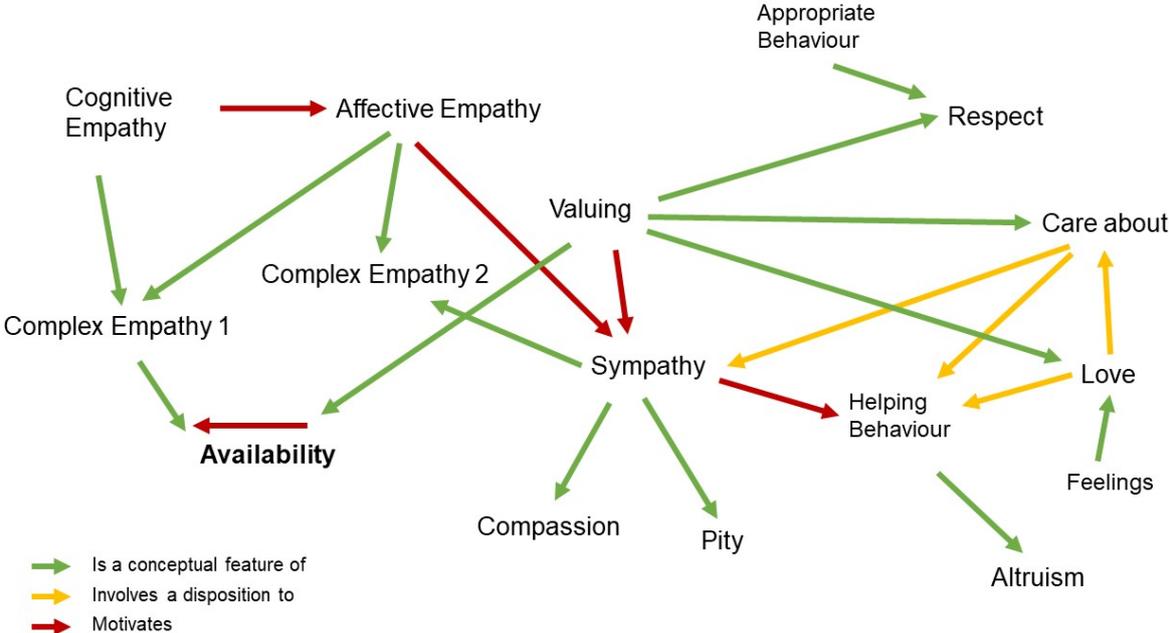


Figure 3. Conceptual map showing the relations between concepts related to availability.

The conceptual map above gives an overview of the relations between the phenomena referred to by the concepts identified above. In order to best understand this map, it is important

to take into account several considerations. First, it is a conceptual map and not a causal map which implies that not all the relations represented by the arrows are causal relations. Some relations (the green ones) are conceptual ones and illustrate the fact that a concept is a central feature of another one. Pity and compassion, for example, are particular types of sympathy, so that sympathy is a constitutive feature of them. Other relations are motivational, in the causal sense (the red ones). That means that one phenomenon motivates (consciously or not) the occurrence of another. This is the case of the relation between sympathy and helping behaviour, since sympathy has been shown to lead to helping behaviour. Lastly, some relations are dispositional (the yellow ones). For example, care involves a disposition to feel sympathy and to manifest helping behaviour. When discussing the relations between availability and other phenomena, it is thus important to consider what type of relation connects them.

Second, the position of the concepts on the map is not illustrative of their complexity and the distance between the concepts does not represent conceptual proximity or distance. Unfortunately, there were too many elements and relations to represent on the map to involve those aspects. Only the relations between the concepts and not their positions on the map should be considered.

Third, the aim of this map is not to be exhaustive but to illustrate the main relations between the concepts. As it will become apparent in the descriptions of those phenomena below, many of them are partially constituted by others or by dispositions to those phenomena. The aim of the map was to illustrate this, and we can see that the concepts are interrelated in a complex way. Furthermore, I added the causal relationships that have been empirically investigated or that are constitutive of the phenomenon, as in the case of availability, where the valuing motivates the understanding. To be exhaustive, more relations would have to be added, especially because if a phenomenon involves a disposition to another, there most likely is a causal relation between them as well (and vice versa). I did not add those relations because they would have made the map confusing. For example, the disposition to help someone is an important feature of caring about, but the disposition to feel sympathy is not a constitutive feature of affective empathy. Furthermore, we can see on the map that many phenomena are indirectly related. For example, because compassion and pity are types of sympathy, they can also motivate helping behaviour. Illustrating those relations would not have added more information, thus, for the sake of intelligibility, only direct relations were included.

Fourth, it is important to see that those concepts refer to different types of things. Many concepts refer to what we might want to call attitudes, or complex affective and/or cognitive mental states, such as sympathy, pity, and empathy. Other concepts refer to actions or processes (mental actions). This is the case of altruism and cognitive empathy. Concepts like care, and, to some extent love, are complex attitudes that are mainly dispositional. Since, as

argued in the [previous chapter](#), availability is a mental action, this is another way in which availability can be said to differ from other phenomena. Lastly, it is important to point out that respect is the only phenomenon that involves a normative element, since respect for someone or something involves behaving in an appropriate towards it.

Fifth, concepts differ among themselves in terms of complexity. For example, more complex attitudes such as compassion or complex forms of empathy are constituted by different simpler attitudes, or, like compassion, by a subcategory of one of them. One important way to distinguish those concepts between one another is thus to observe their level of complexity and to identify their more basic components. Unfortunately, as already explained, because of the large number of relations between those concepts, the different levels of complexity could not be visually represented.

As the map shows, each concept has its unique set of relations that connects it with and distinguishes it from other concepts. What comes out clearly from the map is that many concepts involve a valuing of the other person (empathy<sub>2</sub>, availability, care, respect, love). All of those concepts are thus indirectly related. Since valuing leads to sympathy (which leads to helping behaviour), this explains why when we care for, love, or respect someone, we feel sympathy for her if we perceive her as being in a good or bad situation for herself and are motivated to help this person. However, as we will see below, some of those concepts seem to involve different types of valuing. This is why respect is fundamentally different from care or love.

Because they do not involve a valuing of their object, affective and cognitive empathy are rather isolated on the map. This is because they refer to affective and cognitive processes used to understand others and are in themselves neutral regarding the value of their objects.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, most concepts that involve a valuing of another do not feature aspects regarding the understanding of this person. They might require some understanding of their object to be instantiated, e.g. to feel sympathy for someone we must understand that she is in a good or bad situation, but their instantiations themselves do not involve actively trying to understand their objects.

There are two exceptions, complex empathy<sub>2</sub> and availability, that both involve a valuing and an understanding aspect of another. Availability is different from empathy<sub>2</sub>, understood as affective empathy and/or sympathy, in that it also involves cognitive empathy (through complex empathy<sub>1</sub>), which plays a very important role in understanding others, and in involving valuing rather than sympathy. This latter fact makes availability more encompassing, since sympathy arises only when someone we value is perceived in a non-neutral situation. An important

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<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, it has been shown that understanding someone inclines us to value her and to feel sympathy for her (see [chapter 4](#) for more on that) (Decety et al. 2013; Van Lange 2008; Oswald 1996).

aspect of availability is also the way the valuing and the understanding component are related. In availability, unlike in complex empathy<sub>2</sub>, the valuing of someone motivates the understanding of that person. Those two aspects also distinguish availability from a compound of cognitive empathy + sympathy. The map illustrates the fact that the concept of availability identifies a complex mental structure that is not accounted for by any other concept of the semantic field.

I will now show how availability is different from those other concepts into more detail by considering each concept separately.

### **3.3 Description of the Concepts and their Relations to Availability**

Although there is also quite a lot of verbal dispute around what empathy and sympathy refer to, a review of the literature shows that different phenomena can clearly be distinguished from each other, however we want to name them (Batson 2011; Coplan and Goldie 2011). There is thus a broad agreement on what affective and cognitive empathy are. Although affective empathy and sympathy have already been shortly discussed in [chapter 2](#), it will be useful for the purpose of this chapter to describe them again, especially to distinguish them from other closely related concepts.

#### **3.3.1 Affective Empathy**

Affective empathy is usually understood as an experience, mostly affective, of what another is feeling, or something close enough to what she is experiencing, without losing sight of the fact that this experience appears to be the other's (see for example de Vignemont and Singer 2006; Maibom 2017). Thus, in front of someone grieving, we empathise if we seem to feel that person's sadness.

What is characteristic of empathy is that the experience is given first personally. Whether we become empathetic to someone's emotion automatically or as a result of imaginatively putting ourselves in her situation, we experience an emotion that appears to us as being what the other person is feeling. This means that the emotion shares its principal characteristics with the emotion the other person is experiencing. For example, if a friend is feeling concerned or anxious about her parent who is showing signs of dementia, we feel empathy if we also experience anxiety about an aging and possibly sick parent. Empathy is first-personal, unlike sympathy, which would consist in fearing *for* someone else because of her situation with her parent (see sympathy below) (Singer and Klimecki 2014; Simmons 2014).

Nevertheless, empathy is also characterised by the fact that this first-personal experience is attributed or projected onto the other person. Although we feel the emotion first personally, we do not lose track of the fact that we are not the one in the situation eliciting the

emotion (e.g. having difficulties with an aging parent), but the other person is. The emotion experienced is thus seen as being the other's. We are aware that we are having that emotion *because* someone else is experiencing it.

One important, but difficult, question for empathy is to specify its required degree of accuracy. It is assumed that if we feel what seems to us to be someone else's shame about some event, while this person is in fact rejoicing over it and proud of it, we are not empathising. It is empathy if what we are experiencing is accurate. But it is also assumed that we do not need to get the emotion exactly right to be empathising. That would be too demanding, since we can rarely know very precisely what another is feeling. But how accurate the experience needs to be to qualify empathy is often left unspecified. It is often said that what we feel needs to be "close enough" or "in tune" with what the other person is feeling. Some, like Coplan, are more specific and argue that we need type identity (the same type of emotion) (Coplan 2011). It seems reasonable to say that the valence of the emotion, the basic type of emotion (anger, fear, joy, sadness) and the object should be correctly identified for an emotional reaction to count as empathy. I have included those criteria in the above description of affective empathy, but this is an issue that remains to be settled.

Two other phenomena, emotional contagion and personal distress, are frequently discussed along with empathy because they are closely related to it (Maibom 2017; Coplan and Goldie 2011). Although they are not relevant to availability, it is important to mention them in order to distinguish them from affective empathy. Emotional contagion is the experience of an affective state that is experienced as one's own, but that is had because someone or several people around us are experiencing it, as if had by contagion (Scheler 2003; Darwall 1998; Stueber 2010). For example, while having lunch with someone extremely stressed and anxious about her life, we might start becoming anxious ourselves, although we might not know why we are anxious and what we are anxious about. Another popular example is the one of the pub: while entering a pub where the atmosphere is very joyous, we might start feeling merrier ourselves. Unlike empathy, emotional contagion is characterised by the fact that the emotion is experienced as our own and is thus not attributed to someone else. When we experience emotional contagion, we are also often not aware of the cause of our emotional state. In emotional contagion, it is only the type of emotion, or the phenomenology associated with it that is transmitted, but not the object of the emotion (Davies 2011). If our friend is anxious about her coming exams and we catch her anxiety, we might not know what we are anxious about, or we might give it another object of our own, for example a job interview we are having the following day. Because the emotion is transmitted without its object, moods seem to be especially good candidates for emotional contagion, since they do not have objects (Deonna and Teroni 2012).

Personal distress is an emotional reaction to someone's suffering that causes us to be distressed ourselves (Singer and Klimecki 2014). This can happen for example if the emotion felt by empathy is so strong that we become focused on the emotion only and forget to or stop attributing it to the other person. It can also happen if we have a weak sense of identity or if someone is taken to be part of our identity. In that case, the emotional experience had through empathy is not experienced as someone else's any longer, but as our own (Batson 2009). Emotional contagion and personal distress are not other-oriented, nor positive or pro-social, nor related to interpersonal understanding, and therefore they do not belong to the conceptual space of availability.

Affective empathy helps us understand how others feel and thus can be seen as a way of satisfying the second condition of availability (paying attention to someone with the intention to understand her). However, affective empathy does not amount to availability because other processes can be used to understand others and affective empathy in itself involves no valuing. Affective empathy can thus be seen as one component of the second condition for availability.

### 3.3.2 Sympathy

While empathy can be said to be a feeling *with* another, sympathy (empathic concern) is rather a feeling *for* another and from the perspective of "one-caring" (Darwall 1998). It is a reaction of concern for someone that happens when we desire that person's wellbeing and evaluate her situation as good or bad for her. Feeling sympathy for someone involves feeling worried for her when she is in danger, concerned or sorry for her, when she is suffering, happy for her, when she is well, etc. Because sympathy is felt out of concern for another's wellbeing, the emotion experienced is congruent with her perceived welfare (Batson 2011, 11). The sympathetic emotion might, however, not match what this person is feeling. We might feel worried for someone who is unconscious at the hospital, or relieved that our friend broke up with her partner because we think she was bad influence, although our friend is distressed by the breakup.

The emotional state of sympathy is other-oriented in a different way than empathy. In sympathy, another person is the focus of the emotion that is had for her sake. The focus of an emotion is the object that ultimately concerns us and explains why we feel that emotion (Helm 2007)<sup>13</sup>. For example, when we are afraid of travelling by plane, the focus of our emotion is likely to be our safety. Most of the time, we feel anger, sadness, joy and fear for self-related reasons. The focus of our emotions is then tied to ourselves (our safety, our self-image, our possessions, our identity, our dignity, etc.). When we feel angry because our flight was

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<sup>13</sup> It seems that some emotions do not have such a focus. For example, admiration or surprise do not seem to be related to any object of concern.

cancelled or happy that we won the lottery, it is because those situations are considered as good or bad *for* ourselves. In the case of sympathy, it is someone else’s wellbeing that is the focus of our emotion. We are afraid *for* someone when we judge that she is in danger, happy for her when she is doing well, sad for her we think she has suffered a loss, etc. It is also different to have another as the focus of our emotion and as the object of emotion, e.g. being afraid *of* her. Thus, while having coffee with our friend who is concerned about her aging and perhaps soon disabled parent, we are sympathetic towards her, if we feel sorry or concerned for her about her being worried about her parent (rather than feeling her anxiety).

We react emotionally to what happens to another and take her as a focus of concern because we value her. We already saw in [chapter 2](#) that sympathy is the outcome of a valuing of another and that valuing also involves behavioural dispositions to help someone, to protect her, etc. Those hypotheses have been empirically verified, especially by the work of Daniel Batson. He found that the valuing of another is an antecedent of sympathy and that we are more inclined to help others when we feel sympathy towards them (Batson 2011). This is why sympathy is represented in the map as holding a causal relation with helping behaviour.

Affective empathy, emotional contagion, personal distress and sympathy are close phenomena and can be easily confused. The table below is provided to recapitulate what each of them is.

Someone else’s experience	Type of reaction	Self-experience
“I feel concerned about my aging parent showing signs of dementia.”	Affective empathy	“I feel your concern.”
	Emotional contagion	“I feel concerned (about nothing, or about my job interview)”
	Personal distress	“Seeing you so concerned makes me anxious.”
	Sympathy	“I am sorry that you feel concerned about your parent.” “I am sorry that your parent is showing signs of dementia.”

*Table 3 Table representing the emotional phenomena caused by or directed at another’s experience*

Availability is distinct from sympathy in that it is not an affective reaction (passive) but a mental action (active), although being available often involves some emotions. As explained in [chapter 2](#), since availability involves a valuing of another, it follows that when that person is perceived as being in a good or bad situation, we will feel sympathy for her. But it is also possible to be available to someone who appears to be in a neutral situation and who, as a result, does not elicit sympathy in us. Availability is also different in the fact that sympathy is a reaction to a previously acquired understanding of the situation of another. Feeling sympathy for someone informs us about how we evaluate her situation, but not about the situation itself.

Unlike availability, sympathy involves no effort to understand the other person. However, sympathy could motivate availability. If we feel sympathy for someone, we value that person and we might, out of sympathy, try to understand her and thereby become available to her. Conversely, we might be available to her and, through our availability, come to understand that her situation is good or bad for her and thereby come to sympathise with her.

### **3.3.3 Cognitive Empathy**

Cognitive empathy is not an emotional phenomenon. Rather it “is the capacity to understand another person’s state of mind from her perspective” (Spaulding 2017). There is a big and ongoing debate on how we come to understand others. As explained in chapter 2, the main theories on the market are simulation, theory, and direct perception theories (see chapter 2, [section 2.2.2](#)). While it seems that we come to understand others through all of these ways, proponents of each theory argue that their theory is the most fundamental one used to understand others (Avramides 2019). Again, this is not an issue that needs to be settled here. We can take cognitive empathy to refer to any processes that we use to cognitively (propositionally) understand others. Note, however, that when cognitive empathy is used to refer to simulation and, more specifically, to perspective taking, it might be useful to distinguish between self- and other-perspective taking. We can imaginatively put ourselves in another’s situation, or, if we know that person, we can imagine being that person in this situation. This difference matters because the latter can give a different and more accurate result (Coplan 2011). This difference in the simulation is also important because it has been shown that self-perspective taking can lead to personal distress more easily than other-perspective taking, which has been shown to rather lead to sympathy (Lamm, Batson, and Decety 2007).

Regardless of this issue, cognitive empathy is clearly important for availability because of the central role it plays in understanding others. Together with affective empathy, it can be said to constitute the understanding condition of availability. Like affective empathy, however, cognitive empathy involves no valuing of its object. We can easily try to understand someone we do not value for any other purpose, such as manipulating her, for example. Cognitive empathy is thus part of availability, but availability involves more.

We come now to concepts that are more complex in the sense that they typically refer to a combination of attitudes and processes such as the ones already described.

### **3.3.4 Complex Empathy Concepts**

The term empathy is being used in very different ways. Many authors use the term empathy to refer to affective empathy (Keen 2007 ; Denham 2017 ; Decety and Meyer 2008), although others seem to use it to refer to cognitive empathy or sympathy. Batson, takes empathy, or

empathic concern to be what we have been calling sympathy (Batson 2011). Some phenomenologists, like Zahavi, understand empathy as a particular intentional ability that enables us to understand others' mental states (direct perception), and thus as one form of cognitive empathy (Zahavi 2014).

Many other authors use the term "empathy" to refer to phenomena that are a combination of those. For example, Blair understands empathy, let's call it empathy<sub>1</sub> as comprising both affective and cognitive empathy (Blair 2008). The relevance of this concept is to bring together both the affective and cognitive phenomena that we use to understand others.

Others, like Hoffmann, have a wider understanding of affective empathy, let's call it empathy<sub>2</sub> and take it to be any emotional reaction that is more appropriate to another's situation than to ours (Hoffman 2001). As a result, empathy<sub>2</sub> refers to affective empathy and sympathy together. Preston and de Waal work with a similar concept that refers to the processes that underlie any state of empathy as described by Hoffman (Preston and Waal 2002). They think those states have been overly distinguished while they are deeply entangled at the level of underlying processes and it is better to work with a broader concept for conducting empirical research.

Given the number of publications on empathy, it is certain that there are other understandings of empathy, but those given here are the most common ones. Beyond the verbal dispute around what phenomenon we should call empathy, it is interesting to see that the different concepts all have their value and their relevance in some context (empirical research, understanding others, ...).

Complex empathy<sub>1</sub> is close to availability since it refers to all affective and cognitive processes used to understand others. Complex empathy<sub>1</sub> can thus be taken to constitute [condition 2](#) of availability (paying attention to another with the intention to understand her). Of course, it still does not amount to availability, since it lacks the two other conditions for availability (the valuing and the motivation). The relation between complex empathy<sub>2</sub> and availability has already been discussed above in [section 2](#). They are different in that availability also involves cognitive processes used to understand others. Availability also involves a valuing of another, and only indirectly sympathy, enabling it to encompass cases where the other person is in a neutral situation. Lastly, unlike availability, complex empathy<sub>2</sub> does not have a causal relation between sympathy and affective empathy.

### **3.3.5 Compassion**

The term "compassion" has often been used to refer to what we have called empathy or sympathy (Smith 2010; Hume 1738; Singer and Klimecki 2014). However, there is a concept called "compassion" that is different from both empathy and sympathy. This concept is in fact

a particular form of sympathy. Compassion refers to a type of sympathy that can only be directed to someone suffering. We cannot feel compassion for someone who has just learnt very good news or who is in great danger (or only to the extent that this causes suffering to the endangered one), whereas we can sympathetically rejoice with someone. Compassion thus involves a narrower scope of emotions, namely, only the negative ones such as feeling sorry for and concerned for.

Because we feel compassion for someone suffering, it also implies that the person who is the object of the emotion is aware of her difficult situation, otherwise she would not be suffering from it, or so the idea goes (Sober and Wilson 1999; Ouellette Dubé s. d.). Some also add that it is appropriate to call our sympathetic feeling for someone suffering “compassion” only when the suffering is serious or central to the person suffering (Nussbaum 2003). This is why we normally do not say that we feel compassion for someone who scratched her finger or lost at Trivial Pursuit.

Most authors talking about compassion also add some other condition that characterises this concept, but on which there is no consensus. Compassion is often defined as involving a strong desire to help the suffering one, or at least a strong desire that her suffering be relieved. Although this is taken as an additional characteristic of compassion, it is not clear that this is the case, since sympathy already involves a desire for another’s wellbeing. It is thus likely that sympathy for someone suffering always involves a desire to help.

Unlike sympathy, compassion is also often said to be a positive feeling, a warm emotion (Singer and Klimecki 2014). Again, all instances of sympathy for another’s suffering are positive in the sense that they involve a positive evaluation of this person and of her wellbeing. However, when we feel sympathy for someone suffering, it seems that our emotional state is negative, since feeling concerned or sorry for someone has a negative valence (they evaluate the other person’s situation as negative). One possibility is to conceive of compassion as those instances of sympathy where we direct our attention away from our emotion and rather on our desire to help and on the possibility of the suffering one to be relieved from their suffering (Snow 1991; Caouette and Price 2018). Instead of merely feeling sorry for someone, we wish her well. In that case, compassion can feel positive and warm because what is at the forefront of our mind is the possibility of that person to be better. Note that under that conception, compassion does not seem to be an instance of sympathy anymore, but a reaction to sympathy.

Some, like Aristotle, posit that compassion involves an awareness of a common vulnerability shared with another (Aristotle 2019). Feeling compassion for someone suffering implies a realisation that we could be in that person’s situation and suffer a similar fate. This does not imply that being in her situation is an actual possibility, but that as human beings we share a common vulnerability. Thus, we can feel compassion for victims of a tsunami even if

we live far from the sea because we see how vulnerable we are to natural disasters (for us it could be an earthquake or a fire). Others put it not in terms of shared vulnerability, but of shared nature or condition. When we feel compassion, we recognise that the person suffering is someone who is like us in important respects (Snow 1991; Ouellette Dubé s. d.). It is, however, not clear whether the awareness of a common vulnerability is a characteristic feature of compassion or whether compassion merely disposes us to recognise our common vulnerability.

According to Nussbaum, the recognition of a common vulnerability or shared condition is not necessary for compassion but greatly helps “moving other people into one’s own circle of concern” (Nussbaum 2003, 328). Seeing that we could be in someone’s place, suffering her fate, creates a relation of similarity with her that brings her suffering into our own world and makes us care about it. The recognition of a common vulnerability is thus not a necessary condition for compassion, but a facilitating factor for valuing someone’s wellbeing, which is necessary for sympathy, and thus for compassion.

What is necessary for compassion according to Nussbaum is rather the fact that the person suffering must be seen as not deserving her fate. According to her, we can feel compassion only for someone that we see as innocent, as blameless. Nussbaum says that “insofar as we believe that a person has come to grief through his or her own fault, we will blame and reproach, rather than having compassion” (Nussbaum 2003, 320). We can thus feel compassion for the suffering of a paedophile in prison only if we see that person’s sexual impulses as uncontrollable and having their cause in something external to her, like her father’s violence, for example. According to Nussbaum, the judgement that the suffering one is innocent is not only an enabling condition for compassion but is a cognitive element constitutive of compassion.

Weber argues against Nussbaum that we feel compassion for people who are at fault for their own plight provided their mistakes are ones “any of us could easily have made” (Weber 2005). It is thus possible to feel compassion for someone severely injured in a car accident following her falling asleep on the wheel. Still, Nussbaum could answer that even if in this case the object of compassion is at fault for her situation, we nevertheless judge that she does not deserve such important suffering for such a simple mistake.

Because compassion is generally conceived not as a different emotional reaction from sympathy but as a particular type of sympathy, we can argue on the characteristics used to make the selection. We can see Weber’s argument as showing that he and Nussbaum refer to different subtypes of sympathy. The only objective way of settling the question of which features characterise compassion (vulnerability, blamelessness, etc.) would be to inquire how we practically use this concept. This is an argument only Nussbaum seems to use in that debate. She uses a study (Clark 2007) that shows that we feel sympathy only for plights

caused by “bad luck” or “victimisation by forces beyond a person’s control” (Nussbaum 2003, 322).

I do not intend to settle the question of what compassion exactly is here and am going to consider that compassion is a type of sympathy directed at someone who is suffering and that is further characterised by a condition such as a strong desire to help, the awareness of a shared vulnerability, or blamelessness, that we will nevertheless leave open.

Since compassion is a type of sympathy, it is related to availability in the same way, through the valuing that they both involve. Like sympathy, compassion does not involve trying to understand another and by that, is very different from availability.

### **3.3.6 Pity**

Pity is the less popular concept of those presented here. There is very little literature on pity, as understood nowadays. Authors who mention pity usually only characterise it in order to distinguish it from compassion and other concepts. While the term “pity” was used in the past to refer to sympathy or compassion (Nussbaum 2003; Hume 1738; Smith 2010), it has acquired a very particular negative connotation that distinguishes it from compassion and empathy. Pity is nevertheless rather unanimously considered as a form of sympathy and thus as involving concern for someone (Nussbaum 2003 ; Caouette and Price 2018).

Like compassion, pity can only be directed at someone who is suffering. But unlike compassion, it involves condescension towards the one who is suffering (Nussbaum 2003; Snow 199; Blum 1994). In addition to feeling concerned or sorry for the one suffering, when we feel pity, we also take ourselves to be superior to her and think that it is her inferior condition that makes her plight possible. When we feel pity, we typically think that we could never be in that situation ourselves (Snow 1991). Blum says that in pity “One holds oneself apart from the afflicted person and from his suffering, thinking of it as something that defines that person as fundamentally different from oneself” (Blum 1994, 178). When we feel pity, we can also think that the suffering one is responsible for her situation or that she has humiliated herself (Snow 199; Blum 1994). Pity is well meaning; it is a form of concern (Gelhaus 2012b), and thus it can lead to altruistic actions, but it does not bring us closer to the suffering one. The distance is very well kept and our superiority over the other person is at the centre of the experience of pity. This is why it can feel insulting to be the object of pity.

Since pity is, like compassion, a type of sympathy, it bears the same relationship to availability as compassion does.

### 3.3.7 Care

Care is, like empathy, a very common, but mostly ill-defined concept which is widely used in the fields of health care and care ethics. Because the definitions offered vary substantially among themselves, I will not offer one determinate definition of care but rather identify its main characteristics. Before entering the matter, it is important to distinguish between different meanings of the term “care” and to select the ones that are of interest to us. As pointed by many authors (Collins 2015; Held 2006; Gelhaus 2012b), caring can mean “liking”, as in “I don’t care for chocolate”. It can also mean “making sure that something happens”, as in “I will take care of the problem”. Those two meanings of caring are not of interest to us because they do not belong to the semantic field identified above. There are, however, two other meanings that are relevant. First, caring can refer to an activity, as when we say that we care for our child, and second, to an attitude, as when we say that we care about our friends. Although caring for and caring about seem related to each other (a parent will usually care *for* her child because she cares *about* her child), one can happen without the other, as when a nurse cares for her patient purely for the sake of duty. They are thus two separate phenomena. Although we will mostly be interested in caring about, it will be interesting to inquire into caring for to understand better how they are different.

#### *Caring for*

First, let us start with the action of caring for someone. This is the sense of “caring” that care ethics is most concerned with. The activity of caring is usually understood as an activity that consists in helping someone, in fulfilling that person’s need, or fostering their interest (Held 2006; Collins 2015). It is an activity that is (or at least is intended to be) beneficial to its recipient. For example, Engster says that

caring is better understood in a more basic way, as helping individuals to meet their basic needs and to develop and sustain those basic or innate capabilities necessary for survival and basic functioning in society, including the ability to sense, feel, move about, speak, reason, imagine, affiliate with others, and in most societies today, read, write, and perform basic math. (Engster 2005, 52)

This seems to be the most fundamental and recurrent aspect of caring as an activity. Other aspects of care that are frequently mentioned are its motivational and relational aspects. Many authors think that an action that meets the needs of someone is a caring action only if it is done in a particular way and with a certain intention or motivation (Noddings 2002; Collins 2015). Engster says that it is those actions that fulfil the needs of an individual “in an attentive, responsive and respectful manner” (Engster 2005, 55). The idea behind such a claim seems to be that a caring action is one that stems from a caring attitude towards its recipient and thus that involves genuine concern for the recipient’s wellbeing.

Furthermore, several authors mention the central role that relationships play in care as an activity. Bubeck claims that care can only happen where there is a relationship or at least an interaction occurring:

Caring for is the meeting of the needs of one person by another person, where face-to-face interaction between carer and cared-for is a crucial element of the overall activity and where the need is of such a nature that it cannot possibly be met by the person in need herself. (Bubeck quoted in Held 2006, 32)

Schwarzenbach also claims that the fostering and reproducing of sets of relationships over time is the aim of care (Schwarzenbach quoted in Engster 2005, 51).

One difficulty with identifying the central features of caring as an activity is that a lot of the discussion in care ethics revolves around the normativity of care and the virtues that are important for caring and, as a result, it is sometimes not clear if some characteristics are those of care or of good care. This is the case for example with Sevenhuijsen's characteristics of "attentiveness, responsibility, responsiveness and the commitment to see issues from differing perspectives" that are also endorsed by Held (Sevenhuijsen quoted in Held 2006, 34).

#### *Caring about*

Caring about someone is usually characterised as an emotional attitude, or more precisely as a cluster of dispositions to feel certain emotions. Caring about someone (or something) does not imply being in a particular state at a given time. Rather, it consists in dispositions to feel certain emotions according to the situation of the recipient. Frankfurt says that caring about someone "mak[es] [one]self vulnerable to losses and susceptible to benefits depending upon whether what [one] cares about is diminished or enhanced" (Frankfurt 1982, 260). More precisely, caring about something involves a disposition to react in the following way to its fate:

Typical components of caring include joy and satisfaction when the object of one's care is flourishing and frustration over its misfortunes; anger at agents who heedlessly cause such misfortunes; pride in the successes of the object of care and disappointment over its failures; the desire to help ensure those successes and to help avoid the failures; fear when the object of care is in danger and relief when it escapes unharmed; grief at the loss of the object, and the subsequent nostalgia. (Jaworska 2007, 560)

Note that if we care about someone for their own sake, they will be the focus of the emotion felt. We will feel fear *for* her and not for ourselves. Caring about someone for her own sake thus involves a disposition to feel sympathy for that person. Seidman notes that caring about something does not only involve emotional, but also rational dispositions. Caring about someone implies seeing some considerations related to that person as reason for us to feel emotions, to desire, to act, etc. (Seidman 2009; 2016). For example, caring about our child

involves a disposition to see the fact the she is dangerously close to a cliff as a reason to warn her or to hold her tight with our hand, and to see it as a reason for us to feel fear and to desire her to be safe.

Caring involves those dispositions because we care about what is important to us (Frankfurt 1982; Jaworska 2007; Seidman 2009). According to Frankfurt, there are many things that we desire, but fewer things that we care about. This is because caring concerns only the things that are important to us. We can desire to get new shoes or learning Spanish, but they might not be important to us, and thus, we might not care about them. Of course, this leads to the difficult question of what it means for something to be important to us. Frankfurt says that something is important to us to the extent that we need it, and we need it to the extent that not having it hurts us (Frankfurt 1998). But what count has hurting vs. annoying or disturbing is not clear. Frankfurt also says that things that are important to us make an important difference to us. Whether we can go out of the circularity of this latter claim is unfortunately unlikely, according to him (Frankfurt 1982, 259).

It is also debated whether we care about things that are objectively important to us (whether we think it so or not), about what we judge to be important for us, or about what we see as important for us. For Jaworksa and Seidman, the later correctly characterises caring (Jaworska 2007; Seidman 2009). While Jaworska does not explain what seeing as important consists in, Seidman claims that it consists in a disposition to see considerations related to the object of care as reasons of the type described above (Seidman 2009).

Furthermore, carings are different from other desires that we may have in that we identify with them. What this means is that “it seems very hard and paradoxical to fully distance oneself from one’s carings, to view them as foreign or external, to feel oneself taken over by them” (Jaworska 2007, 538). While an addict might have a very strong desire for her drug dose, and while having that dose might be very important to her, it might not seem to her that the desire is her own. She does not find it desirable for her to have the drug, and yet, she desires it. It is like if an external force was imposing on her this desire. Frankfurt famously accounts for identification in terms of second-order desires (Frankfurt 1982). The desires with which we identify are those that we desire to have. Thus, carings are characterised by the fact that we want to have them.

This way of spelling out identification is often seen as too cognitively demanding (Jaworska 2007) and thus making children and animals unable to care. Jarworska thus adopts another understanding of identification:

any attitude, reflexive or not, has the right kind of authority to speak for the agent, so long as it is part of its function to support the psychological continuities and connections that constitute the agent’s identity and cohesion over time. (Jaworska 2007, 552)

Taking on Bratman's theory of internality, Jaworska thinks that it is plausible that the attitudes that constitute someone's identity are also the ones that "speak for the agent, [are] fully the agent's own and internal" (Jaworska 2007, 548-49). On Bratman's neo-Lockean view, what makes someone's identity are "cross-temporal continuities and connections between the evolving stages of the psychological history of a mind" (Jaworska 2007, 549). Jarworska then argues that secondary emotions, that is, emotions that are not direct reactions to perceptions but to considerations we can make only when we understand a situation and that require higher cognitive functions, typically fulfil this internality requirement (Jaworska 2007, 554). The internality criterion of caring is thus given by the type of emotions it typically involves.

This identification features implies that carings are persisting attitudes (Frankfurt 1982, 261). Because our carings are attitudes that we want to have and that we want to keep having, they have to last to count as such. If we are in a state that satisfies all of the above features, but that only lasts for a minute, then we do not really care about that thing. If we feel sorry for someone at the sight of her suffering, see it as a reason to help her and also identify with her, but nevertheless completely lose interest in that person a minute after and then remain indifferent to her suffering, then Frankfurt would say that we never really cared about her in the first place and that this person's wellbeing is not important to us after all.

Caring about is thus a complex attitude, mainly dispositional, that we have towards people that are important to us, that dispose us at least to feel certain emotions, including sympathy, towards its object. It is also an attitude with which we identify and that lasts in time. This attitude can be expressed in actions that are intended to benefit its recipient. Caring for someone consists in carrying out such actions, according to some authors, whether they are expressions of caring about or not.

How is caring related to availability? We will consider here only how caring about is related to availability for several reasons. First, if caring for can be done for any reason and not only because we care about the other person, then caring for is not relevantly related to availability. Conversely, if caring for is an expression of caring about someone, then it is more relevant to compare availability with caring about.

Caring about refers to desires that are important to us and with which we identify, it implies feeling sympathy for that person in the relevant circumstances. Thus, even though it has not been spelled out above, it is clear from what has been said that caring about someone involves a valuing of that person. Caring and availability thus have a common component. However, again, caring does not share availability's other components. We can care about someone without being available and focus on acting in a practical way rather than on understanding that person's perspective. Furthermore, caring is mainly dispositional attitude, unlike availability. We can thus care about someone without even be thinking about that person. However, this also suggests that caring about someone can motivate us to become

available to another in certain situations. In fact, caring about someone raises our chance of being available to that person, since caring involves a form of valuing that disposes us to pay attention to someone with the intention to understand her. Thus, like with sympathy, the relationship between caring and availability is mediated by the valuing.

### 3.3.8 Respect

Respect is a very important concept for our social, political, and especially moral lives. Once again, however, how to define respect is a controversial issue. First, respect seems to be a diverse phenomenon. We speak of respecting the speed limitations, respecting someone as a person, respecting someone's strength or intelligence, and many have argued that those are different kinds of respect. In what follows, I will leave aside the notion of respect as a behaviour that follows or conforms to a rule without implying an attitude of respect to motivate it. This is the case of respecting the speed limitations, for example. I will rather focus on respect as an attitude, potentially followed and expressed by behaviour. Furthermore, since the aim here is only to sketch the notion of respect, I will not address the normative questions around respect that fills most of the discussions on the subject, such as what an appropriate object of respect is, what object-deserving properties are, and how respect is related to morality.

Before describing the concept of respect, it is important to determine if there are different kinds of respect, and if it is the case, what kind of respect we are talking about. The most important distinctions made between types of respect are the ones of Feinberg, Hudson, and Darwall. Feinberg distinguishes between three phenomena (Feinberg 1973). The first is *respect*, which is the "uneasy and watchful attitude that has 'the element of fear' in it" (Feinberg 1973, 1). In that sense, we respect what is dangerous or powerful (Dillon 2018). The second is *observantia* which is moral respect, that is, seeing an object as commanding moral consideration and appropriate behaviour. The third is *reverentia*, which is esteem or admiration, and which is a feeling of awe towards something sublime. Reverentia "humbles and uplifts us" (Dillon 2018).

Hudson carves the distinction in a completely different way (Hudson 1980). *Evaluative respect* is the type of respect that involves a positive evaluation of its object such as admiration, awe, or esteem. Respecting someone for her selfless life or an artist for her work is such a type of respect. *Obstacle respect* rather refers to taking someone appropriately into consideration for fear of negative consequences that could prevent us from reaching our goal. This type of respect would include respect for the mountain or for a teacher (as someone who holds in her hand the power to make the student pass or not). *Directive respect* is a type of respect directed to rules and laws. This type of respect consists in conforming our behaviour to it. This is the sense of respect that we set aside earlier as bearing on behaviour alone.

Lastly, *institutional respect* also consists in conforming to rules and guidelines but that are prescribed by institutions or instances to which this type of object is directed.

Lastly, Darwall famously differentiated appraisal respect from recognition respect (Darwall 1977). Recognition respect is a form of valuing someone or something intrinsically “in and for himself” that implies a recognition that the nature of the object is such that it restricts what our permissible actions are (Darwall 2006, 126). Recognition respect asks to give its object appropriate weight in our considerations and deliberations “and to act accordingly” (Darwall 1977, 38). Appraisal respect, in contrast, involves a positive appraisal of its object or of its qualities. Appraisal respect is directed at excellence and merit. The object is distinctive for its high quality. Unlike recognition respect, appraisal respect does not involve any restriction as to what actions are permissible.

It might seem that there are a lot of different kinds of respect. However, it seems that Feinberg and Hudson distinctions can be reduced to Darwall’s two-fold distinction. Respect, observantia, and obstacle respect can be seen as forms of recognition respect, while reverentia and evaluative respect can be seen as forms of appraisal respect. Directive respect and institutional respect can be considered as residing outside of this distinction since they only refer to a conforming behaviour. This explains why Darwall’s distinction has been kept as a fundamental and useful one. However, some like Dillon, argue that this distinction is not perfect since it defines recognition respect as an attitude that does not involve a positive evaluation of its object, while it seems that some forms of it can (Dillon 2018). This would be the case for example of respect for someone’s dignity. Another person’s dignity restricts our permissible actions, but dignity is positively valued. Raz also argues that Darwall’s distinction does not differentiate between two kinds or respects, but between two types of objects of respect (Raz 2001). In recognition respect, we respect a person as a moral agent, as a judge or as the rector of the university, while in appraisal respect, we respect a person as a caring mother or amazing painter. According to Raz, although respect will manifest differently depending on its object, it does not follow that there are two different concepts of respect (Raz 2001).

Following Raz, it seems indeed that both appraisal and recognition respect share some characteristics that can be seen as defining a general concept of respect (Raz 2001). First, it seems that respect is a response to something seen as valuable or significant because of its importance or its excellence. What is characteristic of respect is that unlike likings or fearing, the responsive attitude is called for, or even demanded by its object. Whether we respect something or not does (or should) not depend on what our preferences are. Respect is “object-generated rather than wholly subject-generated” (Dillon 2018). According to Darwall, what distinguishes respect from care, for example, is not the type of response, but the feature of the object that is put at the forefront. While care is directed at someone as having a wellbeing,

respect is directed as someone as having a different feature, such as dignity. In any case, once the value of the object is recognised, respect is automatically, or even deontologically called for.

This aspect of recognition is important in respect because it stresses the fact that we see its object as having a value independently of us. Respect is thus not personal. If we have a reason to respect something, anybody has a reason to respect it. Correlatively, if an object O deserves respect because of a feature F, then F is a reason to respect any other object displaying it (Dillon 2018). Respect also asks for a certain behaviour. Whether it restricts our permissible actions or not, it asks for a certain regard or deference and for behaviour expressing and conforming to these. Lastly, there is a normative aspect of respect as it involves responding to the object or seeing it in an appropriate way (Dillon 2018). This normative aspect of respect clearly distinguishes respect from the other concepts explored.

This does not quite settle what kind of thing respect is. What we just said suggests that respect is a conative attitude accompanied by rational and behavioural dispositions. Some, like Drummond, take respect to be rather a feeling or an emotional phenomenon. According to him, respect can be seen as an emotion directed to valuable things or valuable properties of an object (Drummond 2006).

Lastly, we cannot end this section without mentioning, although briefly, Kant. Kant says that respect is a feeling, but unlike other emotions and inclinations, it is fully dependent on the will and is rational. For Kant, the object of respect is the law. When we recognise a law, we immediately respect it as such. This implies a “subordination of my will” to the law “without the mediation of other influences on my sense” (Kant 2010, 4:401). Respect is also humbling: “properly the representation of a worth that infringes upon my self-love” (Kant 2010, 4:401). Our own inclinations have become constrained by the law recognised as superior. “Respect for the law, in other words, is the recognition of the law’s nature as a positive, determining principle of the will (Drummond 2006, 1). Kant’s concept of respect (for person) can be seen as close to the description given above as it involves the recognition of the value of dignity in persons seen as ends, recognition which bears both on the attitude and the behaviour of the subject (Dillon 2018). However, unlike other accounts of respect, for Kant, respect is directed at the law, and not at persons directly (Raz 2001).

Respect can thus generally be taken as a form of valuing of someone that is a response to the perception of that person as excellent or valuable under some respect and by that, as calling for an appropriate response and behaviour. There is thus something normative about respect.

Since respect, again, involves a valuing of the other person, it is thereby related to availability. Like the other concepts seen above, respect is different from availability because it does not involve the other conditions of availability. We can respect someone without trying

to understand that person. The form of valuing involved in respect seems to be more restricted than the one of availability. The concept of availability does not involve the notions of being called for and subject independent. However, respect can motivate availability if the called for behaviour is to pay attention and try to understand the other person.

### **3.3.9 Love**

Love is a concept that is very central to our lives, and yet, it is not an easy task to define it. There are many things that we say we love: our parents, music, Thai food, etc. Here, we will be concerned with personal love, that is, love directed to a person. This type of love encompasses romantic love, but also other types of love, such as love we have for our children and our friends. Most authors agree on the main characteristics of love. Loving someone involves caring about that person, being emotionally vulnerable to what happens to her and desiring and promoting her wellbeing. Love also involves some feelings or emotions that are recurrent. Loving someone also implies seeing its object, or the relationship with its object, as worthwhile. However, there is no agreement on what the fundamental characteristic or structure of love is. It is also not clear what makes it different from mere liking or caring (or the valuing of availability) and in what sense love is deeper or stronger than them. Authors also disagree on what the object of love is (a particular, a bundle of properties, etc.) and what reasons for love are. In what follows, I focus on the first question: what is the fundamental characteristic of love? I will follow Helm by distinguishing between and giving an overview of the four main theories of love that are supported: love as union, love as robust concern, love as valuing, and love as emotion (Helm 2017).

#### *The Union View*

This view goes back to Aristotle and Montaigne. The main idea of this type of theory is that loving someone consists in forming a new entity with the object of love, a *we* that is a form of union with that person. According to Nozick, for example, the reason why we care about people we love and are affected by what happens to them is that they and we “have united to form and constitute a new entity in the world, what might be called a *we*” (Nozick 1990, 69), or at least, we desire to form that union. As a result, we have a new identity in which the person we love is included, so that her “wellbeing is our own” (Nozick 1990, 69). This is why “People who form a *we* pool not only their wellbeing but also their autonomy. They limit or curtail their own decision-making power and rights; some decisions can no longer be made alone” (Nozick 1990, 71). This view has been criticised for being too excessive and denying the autonomy of the lovers (Helm 2017).

### *The Robust Care View*

According to the robust care view, loving someone is fundamentally a form of caring about someone for her own sake. For Frankfurt, for example, love is the form of caring, understood as defined above, that is a “concern for the wellbeing or flourishing of the beloved object that is more or less disinterested and that is also more or less constrained” (Frankfurt 1998). Loving is not a feeling, a cognition, a desire, or a form of valuing. Rather, “Love is essentially a somewhat non-voluntary and complex volitional structure, which bears both upon how a person is disposed to act and upon how he is disposed to control and to manage his motivations and his interests” (Frankfurt 1998, 7). To love someone is to see that person as “an irreplaceable necessity” and her wellbeing as something that we need (Frankfurt 1998, 9). Of course, when we love another, we usually also have some feelings and beliefs about our loved one. But feelings are not fundamental to love, rather they are effects of the volitional structure that love is (Frankfurt 1999). When we love, we are prepared to “serve the interests of [our] beloved” (Frankfurt 1999, 137) and to benefit her, because such behaviour conforms with “[our] established volitional nature, and hence [with our] identity as a person” (Frankfurt 1999, 137).

Those who criticise this view argue that its conception of love is too thin and that aspects of love such as feelings are not mere effects of what love is but constitute it. Another criticism is that this theory conception of the beloved is too passive and that it misses the fact that “love involves interacting agents, each with a capacity for autonomy the recognition and engagement with which is an essential part of love” (Helm 2017).

### *The Valuing View*

According to a third view, love consists in a valuing of its object. There are two types of understanding of this valuing. Some understand it as seeing the object as valuable; love is then an appraisal of the value of the beloved. Some rather understand valuing as giving value to its object; love is thus a bestowal of value on the beloved.

According to the appraisal view, the beloved has a value to which love is a response to, or a recognition of. Velleman says that “love is likewise the awareness of a value inhering in its object; and I am also inclined to describe love as an arresting awareness of that value” (Velleman 1999, 360). While respect, according to Kant, arrests self-love, love, according to Velleman arrests “emotional self-protection” (Velleman 1999, 362). Love is thus a form of valuing that makes us vulnerable to another by bringing our emotional guard down. This is why we are naturally inclined to help those we love. There is nothing blocking our compassion anymore. Furthermore, according to Velleman, love for another person for herself is a response to her value as a person: “I find it plausible to say that what we respond to, in loving

people, is their capacity to love: it's just another way of saying that what our hearts respond to is another heart" (Velleman 1999, 365).

Kolodny also supports an appraisal account of love, but it is not only the beloved that is seen as valuable, but also the relationship with her. Kolodny defines love as following:

love consists (a) in seeing a relationship in which one is involved as a reason for valuing both one's relationship and the person with whom one has that relationship, and (b) in valuing that relationship and person accordingly. (Kolodny 2003, 150)

In order to love someone, we have to already be in some kind of relationship with that person. We then love that person when we see that this relationship is valuable to us and consequently, we see the other person as valuable as well. Unlike other accounts, the relationship with the beloved is fundamental to love and is even partly its object.

The main problem with the appraisal view is that it is not clear how the appraisal that constitutes love is different from other types of valuing. Furthermore, if love is a response to the value of another as a person, or to a relationship we are in, it is hard to explain why we do not love everyone or, for Kolodny, all those we are in a relationship with. It opens the big question of what reasons to love are there?

According to Singer's bestowal view of love, loving someone is not just a response to someone's value, it also "creates a new value" (Singer 2009, 5). We love someone when we appraise her positively and, in addition to that, respond to her in a particular way by giving that person's needs and desires importance. By that, we bestow a value to that person that goes beyond the mere and first appraisal. This "bestowing of value [then] shows itself" in the aspects of love that we already know such as "caring about the needs and interests of the beloved, by wishing to benefit or protect her, by delighting in her achievements" etc. (Singer 2009). But those are merely the effects of love which only consists in the bestowal of value.

There are two difficulties with this account. First, Singer is not very precise in the description of the bestowal of value. Second, it faces the same problem as the appraisal account, which is the difficulty of explaining the selectivity of love and thus how love can be justified (Helm 2017).

### *The Emotion View*

The last type of theories of love is the emotion view. According to this view, love is fundamentally an emotional phenomenon. According to Helm, for example, to love someone is to respond to that person with a certain "rational pattern" of emotions (Helm 2009, 52). What distinguishes love from other attitudes such as liking or caring is intimacy. In love, the other person is an object of import, but she is not so for self-regarding reasons, nor is it because she has been included in our own identity. Rather, she imports to us in the same way as we are an object of import for ourselves. Just as we are the ultimate object of focus of many of our person-

focused emotions such as pride and shame, another person can be an object of concern for ourselves and thus the focus of some of our emotions. Helm says that “such a concern for another is distinctively interpersonal, and it is precisely such identification, with its “depth” of interpersonal relation” that makes love (Helm 2009, 51). To love someone then means being disposed to feel a rational pattern of person-focused emotions that have the beloved as focus (Helm 2010).

In Helm’s view, love and care both involve patterns of emotions and what distinguishes love from care is that we feel pride and shame with the beloved as focus of the emotion. However, it is not very convincing to say that such feelings of pride and shame is what distinguishes love from care. We can fear and feel concerned for people we only care about. In that case, they are the focus of our emotions. It is thus not clear how feelings of pride and shame with another as focus distinguish love from caring.

Each view presents difficulties, and none has been identified as the “winning” theory of love. However, as said above, there is a broad agreement on what features of love are (either as constitutive of love or as effects of love). Love involves caring for the beloved, feeling certain emotions, and a strongly positive evaluation of its object. We can thus see what connections love has with the other concepts discussed here, even if we cannot specify how love is related to them without endorsing a particular theory of love.

Love clearly involves a valuing of the other person which consequently relates it to availability. It is also clear that love does not involve the other conditions for availability and that we can love someone without trying to understand that person. Like with respect and care, love can nevertheless, motivate availability, but does not amount to it. Similarly to respect, love involves a type of valuing that is more restricted than the one of availability. Unlike availability, it involves a strong type of valuing that is stable over time.

### **3.3.10 Altruism**

Altruism is a different concept from the other ones explored here in that it does not refer to an attitude, whether dispositional or not, affective or cognitive, but to a type of action. An action is altruistic “if it results only from motivations directed towards the goal of improving others’ interests and welfare” (Clavien and Chapisat 2013). Among all the actions that we do, altruism refer to those that are done with a certain intention: promoting the wellbeing of someone for their own sake (Batson 2011; Kraut 2018). Note that there is no condition regarding the outcome of the action, whether it is successful in promoting the target’s wellbeing or not. Giving someone water because they are thirsty is an altruistic act if we do it to alleviate that person’s thirst, even if unbeknownst to us, we are giving her poison.

Unlike pity and compassion, altruism is not a concept that involves sympathy or any type of empathy. Altruism has been shown to be causally related to sympathy (Batson 2011). Acting with the intention to promote someone's wellbeing for someone else's sake implies that we value that person's wellbeing. This implies some valuing of that person as such. Since the people we do altruistic actions for are often in need, it follows that we usually have sympathy for them and become motivated to help them. We can thus also consider that valuing causes altruism through sympathy.

Altruism refers to a type of action, by that, it is closer to availability which is a mental action. The concept of altruism in itself does not involve the valuing of the other person, but the altruistic action seems to be motivated by it, just like the mental action of trying to understand another of availability is motivated by the valuing of that person. Altruism and availability are thus causally related through the valuing of the other person. Furthermore, some instances of availability can be considered cases of altruism, if the available one is being available in order to benefit the other person, which is not necessarily the case.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

To sum up, availability's particular structure of the valuing for another person motivating us to pay attention and try to understand that person differentiates it from the other concepts presented above. However, availability shares some of its components, the valuing and the trying to understand another, with many other concepts. Sympathy, compassion, pity, care, love, respect, and altruism all involve conceptually or causally a valuing of another. This is why they are often associated with availability. They often occur with availability and can even motivate it. This explains why some of the precursors thought that care, love, or compassion are features of availability. In our current understanding of availability, however, those concepts are not features of availability, but they often occur together with availability because they share some characteristic.

As alluded to earlier, however, those concepts do not all involve the same type of valuing. For example, Batson argues that for sympathy, it is a valuing of the other person's wellbeing that is necessary (Batson 2011). It is not clear exactly what kind of valuing respect involves, but it seems to be rather a valuing of something else than wellbeing, such as dignity, or personhood. The valuing of availability, like the one of caring, is unspecified, even if some types of valuing are more appropriate than others depending on the context. Because the type of valuing involved in availability is left open, it includes all types of valuing. As a result, availability can occur with and be motivated by all attitudes involving a type of valuing (love as well as respect).

The second condition of availability stipulates that attention and trying to understand another are key features of availability. Attention has not been considered so far, although it is likely a common denominator to all concepts. Indeed, since all the concepts presented above are attitudes (dispositional or not) that have another as an object, or actions done with someone's wellbeing as an aim, it implies that the subject displaying them is paying some attention to someone. In availability, however, we are not simply paying attention to another, but also trying to understand her. As explained above, this is done through affective and cognitive processes such as cognitive and affective empathy. They both contribute to understanding what another is feeling, thinking, etc.

This discussion also shows clearly that availability is not an attitude besides empathy and sympathy. It is not another different emotional phenomenon comparable to them and that could take place instead of them. Rather, like care, respect, and love, availability is a more complex phenomenon that involves some of those more basic attitudes. Furthermore, availability is not an emotional reaction, but a mental action. Thus, even if availability is often associated with empathy and sympathy and often occur together, they are different types of mental phenomena.

In this chapter, we saw that availability is a particular structure that is not accounted for by any of the concepts that belong to the same semantic field. We can see that availability distinguishes itself by the way it is related to valuing and cognitive and affective empathy, and, furthermore, by the fact that there is a causal relation between valuing and both types of empathy. This particular structure of availability is what enables it to play a particular role in our social lives. The role of availability will be the object of the second part of this thesis.

## **PART II – EFFECTS AND APPLICATIONS OF AVAILABILITY**

### **4. Effects and Role of Availability**

In this chapter, I inquire about the effects that availability has on the one who is available, the one she is available to and their relationship, and discuss the role that availability plays in our social lives. I will argue that availability greatly enhances our chances to reach an accurate propositional and experiential understanding of another person. Such an understanding has several positive consequences. First, it makes the one who understands feel close and connected to the one who is understood and puts the first one in a good position to know how to react, behave, or help the other best. Second, understanding impacts positively the one who is understood, by making her feel understood and valued. Third, those effects help them cooperate and develop a good relationship. By enhancing understanding, availability thus greatly benefits our social lives. I concede that availability is not the only way to reach an accurate understanding of another and is not always accessible. Nevertheless, other ways to understand others propositionally and experientially do not yield the feelings of closeness, connection and felt understanding as availability does. This is what makes availability central to the development of close, intimate, and satisfying relationships with others.

I will start by explaining why availability leads to a better understanding of the person we are available to. I will then describe the empirically known effects of such an understanding. I then discuss the role that availability plays in our social lives more generally by comparing it with other ways to understand others. I end this chapter by considering success conditions for availability to deliver the effects described earlier.

#### **4.1. Availability and Understanding**

In this section, I argue that availability greatly enhances our chances to understand the person we are available to both propositionally and experientially. A detailed description of both types of understanding will be provided in the next chapter (chapter 5, [section 5.2.1](#) and [5.3.1](#)). For our present purpose, the description given in chapter 2 ([section 2.2.2](#)) should be sufficient.

As described in the previous chapters, availability is the mental action of paying attention to someone and trying to understand her because we value her. When we try to understand another in that way, we are likely to come to a better understanding of her. Think about Milena, whose journalist application was rejected, meeting with her dear friend Sandrine. Even though Sandrine already knew Milena very well and thought she knew how she felt and what she

thought before meeting with her, by becoming available and making the effort to try to understand her, Sandrine might learn new facts about Milena and come to a better understanding of her. She might discover that unlike her, Milena does not think that the rejection of her application by the newspaper that made her work so hard as an intern is hurtful or even, disrespectful, but is rather the ultimate proof of her inability to be a good journalist. Moreover, Sandrine is not indifferent to Milena's situation. Rather, she empathises with her and feels what she imagines what Sandrine is feeling. She also feels sorry and worried for Milena. By becoming available to Milena, Sandrine acquired a better propositional and experiential understanding of Milena. We already touched upon the fact that availability puts us in a good position to understand another in [chapter 2](#). We will now see why this is the case in more detail.

*Paying attention with the intention to understand*

The second condition for availability states that when we are available, we are paying attention to another with the intention to understand her. This mental action is extremely important for understanding others. It is quite intuitively convincing that we are in a better position to understand someone when we are actively trying to do so than when we are trying to do something else. But this can be further justified by looking at how attention works. As explained in [chapter 2](#), attention selects some objects to be at the centre of our consciousness. This selection depends on what we are trying to do. According to Wu, attention selects elements for action, while for Watzl, attention structures those elements according to our priorities, which themselves depend on what we are trying to do (Wu 2014; Watzl 2017). In other terms, what we are trying to do will guide our attention to efficiently select the elements that are useful for that purpose. Thus, if we are trying to understand someone, we will pay attention to different aspects of her than if we are painting a portrait of that person. This implies that if we are trying to understand someone mostly to reach another goal such as manipulating her or deal with her efficiently, those aims will influence what elements are selected or prioritised by our attention. It follows that in order to best understand someone's perspective, it is best to mainly aim at that, which is the case when we are available.

This does not imply that it is not possible to learn about others without actively trying to understand them. We constantly learn facts about others even if we are not interested in them and do not intend to learn facts about them, just by looking at them or by overhearing them. When we see someone begging for money in the street, we come to understand many things about that person, even if we are not trying to. We might also overhear a conversation in which someone is sharing about her and thus achieve a high degree of understanding of that person's perspective, although we have no interest in her and come to that understanding despite ourselves, so to say. It is thus not the case that availability is the only way to come to understand someone.

However, the more complex the situation is and the less readily available the information is, and the less likely it is that we can understand someone without trying. If, without knowing Milena, we see her obviously upset in a café, we cannot understand her without trying to acquire new information. Even if we know her situation, and immediately see on her face that she is depressed, we will need to invest more efforts into understanding her, and, for example, ask questions. Even in the case where someone is disclosing herself and giving us all the information we need to understand her, we are more likely to come to that understanding if we pay attention and try to understand her. If we are busy with something else, replying to an email on our phone, for example, we might miss important pieces of information about her or fail to put them correctly together.

We can also learn a lot about others by trying to understand them not for themselves, but for a further purpose. For example, a politician studying her opponent to figure out her weaknesses can come to a very good understanding of her opponent. However, again, in complex situations, we might fail to grasp aspects of the other's perspective because that is not what we are focusing on. The politician will likely come to a better understanding of her opponent's weaknesses than of her way of seeing the world or of her present experience. Consequently, we are better positioned to understand someone when we are actively trying to understand that person.

#### *Valuing someone*

The second and third conditions for availability, namely the fact that we value someone and that this valuing motivates us to pay attention and try to understand her also help us to understand another by motivating us to do so. We saw above that in order to best understand someone, understanding her needs to be our main aim. If we value this person, then this gives us a reason to try to understand her and it can motivate us to do so. Indeed, if we value someone, we see some worth in her for herself. This implies that what that person is experiencing and thinking matters to us, as her experiences and thoughts are central to whom she is at a given moment. Typically, caring about someone involves being interested in that person, in what she thinks, feels, and how she sees things. Our valuing of someone can thus provide us with an interest in her and the motivation to try to understand her.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the valuing of another motivates us to try to understand her experientially. We can have many reasons to try to understand someone (to help her, to manipulate her, to find our way, etc.). Not all those reasons motivate us to take that person's perspective and feel what she is feeling. Doing so is costly in time, since it takes some time to take the perspective

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<sup>14</sup> As explained in chapter 2, [section 2.2.3](#), whether the disposition of the valuing to pay attention to someone and to try to understand her is activated depends on different factors, mainly environmental ones. The valuing of another does not necessarily motivates us to pay attention to her and to try to understand her.

of another, but also affectively. We know that if we start to feel what another is feeling, we will be emotionally affected first by feeling that person's experience, second, if that person is in a difficult situation, by being concerned about her. We will then feel personally involved and will be motivated to help. This is not something that we are willing to do for anyone in any situation. Shaw and al. have found that sometimes, we refrain from perspective taking to avoid becoming emotionally invested and motivated to help at our own cost (Shaw, Batson, and Todd 1994). If we value the other, however, this gives us a reason to engage in affective empathy. On the one hand, because we value someone, it is likely that we care about her experiences and are willing to understand that aspect of her perspective. Because we value this person, we might also be willing to do things for her own sake, including paying the time and the affective costs of understanding her for her sake. Furthermore, if we value someone, we are already emotionally vulnerable to what happens to her. As a result, those consequences of experientially understanding another cannot deter us from engaging in affective empathy. Batson, Eklund, et al. have found that indeed an increased valuing of someone's welfare was correlated with spontaneous perspective taking (Batson and al. 2007).

Thus, being available enhances our chances to understand another. For it not to be the case, we would have to show that attention does not help us to reach our goals and that, for example, people who are distracted while performing a task perform it just as well as others.<sup>15</sup> Alternatively, we would have to show that the selection that attention operates is not related to our goals or priorities. The resulting picture of attention would be quite far from the understanding that we have of attention according to our experience, philosophical inquiry and empirical data.

Furthermore, to show that availability does not promote the understanding of the object of availability, we would have to show that we are not more interested in the people we value than in the ones we do not value, and that we are not more susceptible to experientially understand the ones we value than others. However, this would be contradictory with the very notion of valuing since in [chapter 2](#), we described it mainly in terms of its dispositions to pay attention to the objects of valuing and to act so as to promote or safeguard the wellbeing or integrity of those objects. Thus, we would rather have to show that there is no such thing as a valuing. I am not quite sure how this would be carried out, but it would again imply that our mind is very different from what we take it to be both from a lay and a scientist perspective. As long as we do not have good reasons to question our usual ways of seeing attention and conative attitudes, we can take availability to greatly enhance our chances to understand another both propositionally and experientially.

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<sup>15</sup> Research shows that when the cognitive load is low, distractions can disrupt task performance, but when the cognitive load is high, distractions are rather eliminated and people are not aware of them (Lavie 2010).

## 4.2 Effects of Understanding

An accurate propositional and experiential understanding of another can have multiple positive consequences on all parties involved and can improve the wellbeing and the satisfaction of both of them. Here, I describe first the effects of understanding on the one who understands, second on the one who is understood, and third, on the relationship between them. Marcel argued that availability makes us feel closer and connected from others, but if we look at our experiences of interpersonal understanding, it is not directly clear why understanding another or being understood should bring up this feeling. To keep this chapter focused on the effects of availability, I will use some empirical data to describe the effects of availability. In the [next chapter](#), however, I will explore interpersonal understanding in more detail, which will enable us to understand why availability yields the effects described here.

### *On the one who understands*

The epistemic gain of an accurate propositional understanding of another can be useful for many purposes. First, it enables us to decide how to respond to this person in an informed way, thus enhancing the chances of our response to be appropriate, or at least, better aligned with our purpose. A good understanding of another can also be used to manipulate someone, to obtain a favour, to know how to calm someone down or cheer her up, etc.

Because when we are available, we value the person we are paying attention to, it implies that when we are available, we also have a disposition to be motivated to help this person (see [section 2.2.1](#)). If we come to understand that the person we are available to needs help, we will be motivated to find a way to provide that help. Being available to someone who needs help has then the double advantage of (1) putting us in a good position to understand that this person needs help and to understand what kind of help she needs, and (2) motivating us to help. Availability can be especially useful in complex social situations where it is not clear straightaway whether someone needs help or what her problem is. For instance, a parent who sees that her child does not want to go to school, will be in a position to help the child only if she understands why the child refuses to go to school. Her help will be different if the child's reason is that she is being bullied or that she finds school boring. Availability is thus valuing in complex social situations because it enhances the chances of producing effective helping behaviour.

Furthermore, a lack of propositional understanding is usually a frustrating experience. We are constantly looking for meaning around us and dislike it when things do not make sense to us (Heine, Proulx, and Vohs 2006). However, the experience of understanding someone goes beyond the mere satisfaction of making sense of the world that surrounds us. Through affective empathy and sympathy, experiential understanding leads to feelings of connection and closeness.

Let us look first at the experience of affective empathy. This experience can have a positive or a negative valence depending on the emotion that the other person is feeling. The experience of empathy can thus be uplifting or rather uncomfortable or depressing. If the person we empathise with is suffering, when we take her perspective, we somehow suffer as well. As we saw in the previous chapter, if we then become focused on ourselves and the suffering that we feel, we can become genuinely distressed ourselves (Batson 2011). This personal distress is then a negative experience in the sense that it is uncomfortable and rather diminishes our wellbeing. Personal distress, as we saw in [chapter 3](#), is more likely to happen when we picture ourselves in someone's situation than when we try to imagine what this person is experiencing (Lamm, Batson, et Decety 2007).

If our focus remains on the other person, however, we do not remain indifferent to her. If that person is in a situation that we see as good or bad for her, we will feel sympathy or compassion for her. When we feel someone's suffering, for example, we come to feel sorry for that person. Affective perspective taking has been shown to induce sympathy (Decety et al. 2013; Van Lange 2008; Oswald 1996). If we feel someone's joy or happiness, however, we will rather rejoice with that person and be happy for her. However, even when the valence of sympathy is negative, we wish that person well and we want to help her. Those states are rather positive, in the sense that their object is the wellbeing of this person, and this wellbeing is seen as a good thing. Singer and Klimecki found that indeed sympathy is associated with positive affective states, in contrast to mere empathy (Singer et Klimecki 2014).

Second, when we feel sympathy for someone, we feel close to that person. This feeling of closeness has sometimes been labelled fellow-feeling (Scheler 2017). By experientially (and propositionally) understanding someone, we see that we are alike this person in some way. We might share a vulnerability, a plea, or hedonistic experiences. This similarity or shared experience makes us feel close to the other and connected to her. What has been shown is that affective empathy can bring a sense of self-other overlap, which could explain the feeling of closeness (Galinsky, Ku, and Wang 2005). When we feel affective empathy for someone, we tend to include this person into ourselves, and then as a result, feel that we are closer. However, there is little empirical data on this, and it is not clear at this stage if this feeling is part of sympathy or distinct from it. In the [next chapter](#), I delve further into this and explain why experientially understanding another makes us feel close and connected to that person in certain situations.

Not all instances of experiential understanding bring about sympathy and fellow-feeling. Those outcomes depend largely on the object of understanding. If someone's situation is very benign, it will have little effect on us, unless that person is very dear to us. The more serious someone's situation is, and the more it invites sympathy and fellow-feeling. Other factors will also be discussed in the [next chapter](#).

### *On the one who is understood*

Fortunately, the effects of understanding on the person who is understood are better documented. When the available one comes to a good understanding of another and that this person perceives it, she tends to feel understood and valued. This experience is important and makes a big difference for the recipient of availability. It is not surprising that when it seems to us that another has understood us, we feel understood. But interestingly, feeling understood is closely related to feeling “valued, respected, and validated” (Morelli, Torre, and Eisenberger 2014), so much so that those feelings have been taken to partly constitute what felt understanding is. For example, Lun et al. take felt understanding to be “defined as the feeling that one is accurately perceived, understood, appreciated, and cared for” (Lun, Kesebir, and Oishi 2008, see also Oishi, Krochik, and Akimoto 2010). Again, the more detailed description of interpersonal understanding that will be provided in the [next chapter](#) will help us understand why this is so. To understand what the effects of availability are, which is the purpose of the present chapter, it will be sufficient to know that when we feel understood, we tend to also feel valued and cared for.

Felt understanding is a positive experience that has been shown to have many benefits. Felt understanding is associated with more intimacy and closeness with others (Lun, Kesebir, and Oishi 2008; Reis et al. 2000). According to Morelli, “Taken together, these analyses suggest that feeling understood by someone may increase interpersonal closeness, while not feeling understood may create social distance” (Morelli, Torre, and Eisenberger 2014). As a result, people who feel understood are more satisfied with their relationship (Cahn 1990; Murray et al. 2002) and are happier and healthier (Lun, Kesebir, and Oishi 2008; Reis et al. 2000; Oishi, Krochik, and Akimoto 2010). Lastly, it has also been shown that felt understanding is important in the therapeutic relationship, especially the psychotherapeutic one (see for example Ornstein 2013).

Those studies do not distinguish between propositional and experiential understanding. However, it seems that the recipient has to perceive some emotional involvement from the one who understands to feel valued, respected, or cared for. When there is propositional understanding, but no experiential one, the other person will seem detached or indifferent. When we have the feeling that someone does not fully comprehend (experientially) what we are going through, we do not feel understood because that part of our experience has not been grasped. The fact that felt understanding is strongly correlated with feeling valued and cared for also shows that we need an emotional involvement from another to feel understood (see [chapter 5](#) for an explanation).

When we do not feel understood, however, the opposite happens. Felt misunderstanding has been shown to elicit “(a) disquietude, (b) discordant perceptions, and (c) heightened awareness of emotions” such as “sadness, depression, dissatisfaction, abandonment,

loneliness, irritability, insecurity, confusion, and annoyance, along with feelings of being attacked, pressured, devalued, and unappreciated” (Condon 2008). The feeling of being misunderstood is a negative experience that makes people feel rejected and that brings distance between them.

#### *On the Relationship with the Recipient*

Because of all its positive effects on both the one who understands and the one who is understood, understanding also has positive effects on the relationship between the two, in the sense that it helps to develop a bond between them and a satisfying relationship, and ultimately, can improve their wellbeing. As we have seen, felt understanding is a predictor of relationship satisfaction (Cahn 1990; Murray et al. 2002). Both understanding and felt understanding bring closeness and intimacy. When we understand or feel understood, we are positively disposed towards the one we understand or who understands us, and this greatly helps to develop the relationship. Moreover, when we experientially understand another thanks to perspective taking, we are led to feel sympathy and to be pro-socially motivated towards the person we understand (Batson 2011). We are thus motivated to help this person or to cooperate with her, thereby setting a good base for a satisfying relationship. This implies that availability can have many benefits. On particular example, the doctor-patient relationship will be explored in [chapter 6](#).

### **4.3 The Role of Availability**

Because availability leads to experiential and propositional understanding, it puts us in a good position to help its recipient effectively, makes us feel close and connected to the person we are available to, makes that person feel understood and valued and thus help our relationship. Those effects of availability certainly seem to make it valuable. However, there might be other ways, equally or even more effective, to reach those effects. It is therefore not clear yet what the specific role, and hence importance, of availability is. In this section, I compare availability with other ways to reach an understanding of others and argue that availability is at least as good and efficient as those other ways. Furthermore, the valuing of availability is important to make us feel close and connected to the recipient of availability and to make the latter feel understood. Because of this, availability plays an important psychological and social role.

### 4.3.1 Availability vs. other Motivations to Understand Others

#### *Valuing vs. other motivations to understand someone*

In the last section, I argued that in order to be in the best position to understand someone, we should be aiming at understanding her (and her perspective) for herself. This implies that the second condition for availability (paying attention with the intention to understand) needs to be satisfied if we want to have the best chances of understanding another both propositionally and experientially. However, we can doubt that the other features of availability (that the valuing motivates) need to be satisfied as well. A valuing of another motivates us to try to understand another propositionally and experientially, but there might be other equally or more effective motivations. For example, we might want to understand someone because it is our duty as a therapist or simply because we are curious. Aren't we in those cases in a position as good as availability to understand this person propositionally and experientially?

We already saw that attention selects objects that are relevant to our aim or priority and that this is why we are better positioned to understand another if that is what we intend to do. Thus, if our aim is to understand something specific about another like her weaknesses or her anger triggers, rather than to understand that person's perspective or experience, we are not ideally positioned to realise the latter purpose. It is possible, however, that some purposes require an in-depth propositional and experiential understanding of someone's perspective. This might be the case if we are a psychotherapist and think it is our duty to understand our patient in that way, or if we are participating in an experiment where it is asked of us that we imagine what someone thinks and feels. In those cases, we will need to actively try to understand the other person's perspective both propositionally and experientially to reach our aim. It thus seems that other motivations to understand someone can be as conducive to understanding as a valuing of that person.

For it to be the case, however, we need to be able to momentarily "forget" about our further purpose and manage to focus mainly on the instrumental aim of understanding someone propositionally and experientially. If we remain focused on those further goals (doing our duty, completing the experiment), we will not be ideally positioned to understand someone. It is possible to immerse ourselves in an instrumental goal. As we do it, we might also become curious about the other person or even become available to her. However, this requires a cognitive effort and it might not always be easy to push our main concern to the side of our mind. A paradigmatic example would be being so preoccupied with passing a test that we become unable to focus on the test, and hence, pass it. Availability has thus the advantage of making ourselves genuinely interested in the other person and wanting to understand her for herself, and of avoiding this further constrain.

The case of curiosity is slightly different, though, because when we want to understand someone out of sheer curiosity, we are trying to understand her for the sake of understanding her (Schmitt and Lahroodi 2008). In such cases, our ultimate purpose is no threat to the process of understanding another and we are effortlessly drawn towards that aim. It seems, however, that the object of such curiosity is more often propositional understanding than experiential understanding. We are often curious about what situation another is in and less often curious about what it really feels like to be in that situation.

Some might doubt that we can come to experientially understand someone that we do not value. We might think that even if we desire to become emotionally vulnerable to do our duty, it is not possible to understand someone experientially without first valuing them. This latter thesis seems, however, too strong. We can experience automatic empathy and feel what another is feeling without being motivated to do so by a valuing of her. Empirical data also suggests that affective empathy and sympathy can be elicited by instructing subjects to imagine what strangers in need feel (Batson 2011). Some might nevertheless reply that this shows that the subjects of the experiments already valued the strangers' wellbeing. This would mean that the subjects' valuing of the strangers were activated before or by the perspective-taking process and allowed experiential understanding. It is not clear what in the perspective taking would activate the subject's valuing of strangers. It would also imply that in general, we have many valuing of strangers dormant somewhere in our minds. It seems more plausible that the experiential understanding provided by perspective taking elicits or activates a valuing of the other. In the [next chapter](#), I attempt to explain this. If that is not the case, however, and we can experientially understand only those that we value, then it makes the case for availability stronger. It would imply that we cannot understand someone experientially purely for the sake of duty. Availability would be the only way to experientially understand another. Ultimately, this question could be empirically answered.

Note that even if it is possible to understand someone experientially without already valuing that person, wanting to do so might not always lead to success. If we are too preoccupied with something else, or are self-defensive and dislike emotional vulnerability, we might not be able to find the emotional resources needed for experiential understanding and sympathy. We might find inner resistance to perspective taking. It is possible that valuing someone makes perspective taking more successful, especially as we are already emotionally vulnerable to the person we try to understand. But even when we are available to someone, we might have inner obstacles preventing us from experientially understanding another. Thus, availability might provide only a slight advantage in that regard.

Another advantage that availability might have for understanding others compared with other motivations is that the motivation provided by the valuing of the other person is intrinsic – we are interested in that person for herself – whereas the other motivations mentioned are

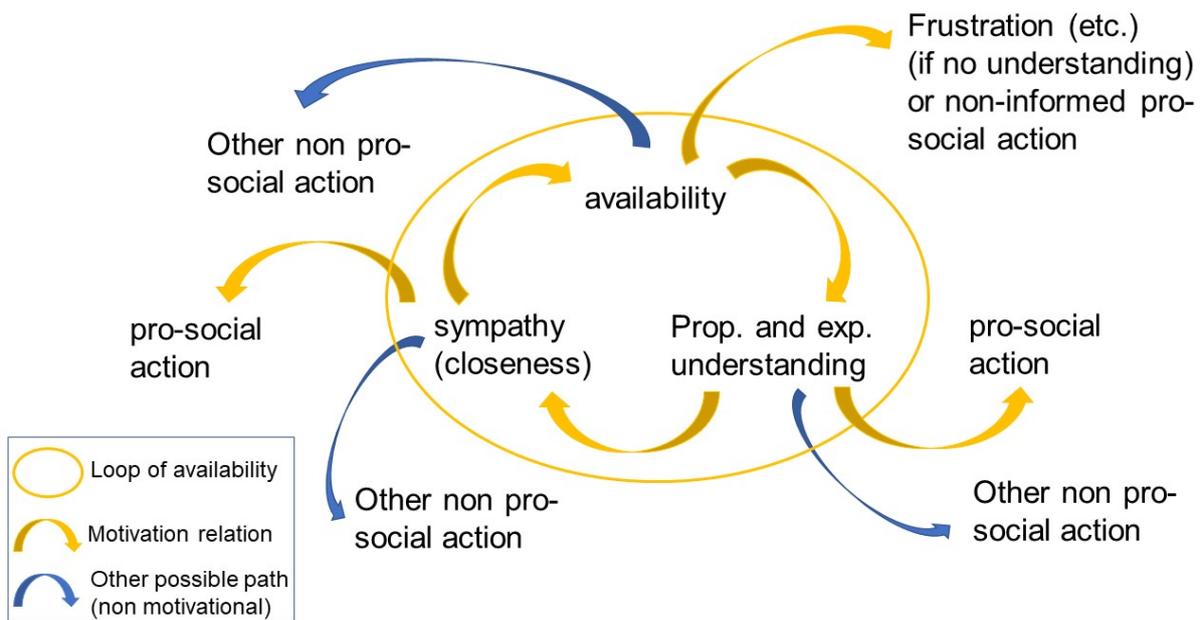
extrinsic – understanding is a means towards a further purpose. There is some empirical data suggesting that intrinsic motivation might be more effective and have an impact on “persistence, performance, and productivity” (Grant 2008 ; see also Deci and Ryan 2000 ; Walker, Greene, and Mansell 2006 ; Taberero and Hernández 2011). This would imply that we can understand others more effectively when we are available than when we are motivated by a sense of duty, for example. We shall, however, remain prudent with these results as some psychologists claim that the division between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation is too simplistic (Reiss 2012).

Furthermore, for many of us, there are not so many occasions where we find ourselves having a further purpose that can be fulfilled only by understanding someone (and not one particular feature of that person). As mentioned above, there are the purposes of doing our duty, of completing an experiment where this is the task to carry out, of wanting to write a novel on or a biography of someone. The purpose of helping someone will usually either be the one of doing our professional or moral duty, or be motivated by a valuing of that person, in which case we will be available. This suggests that the valuing of another is a more common motivation to understand someone and thus that availability is a more widespread or accessible way to reach the benefits described above.

Thus, there are other motives than a valuing of another that can put us in a good position to understand that person. The valuing, and the availability, might be less cognitively demanding, more effective, and more common than the others, but this claim is in need of further justification. However, there are reasons to think that availability is especially important to feel close and connected to the one we understand and for that person to feel understood.

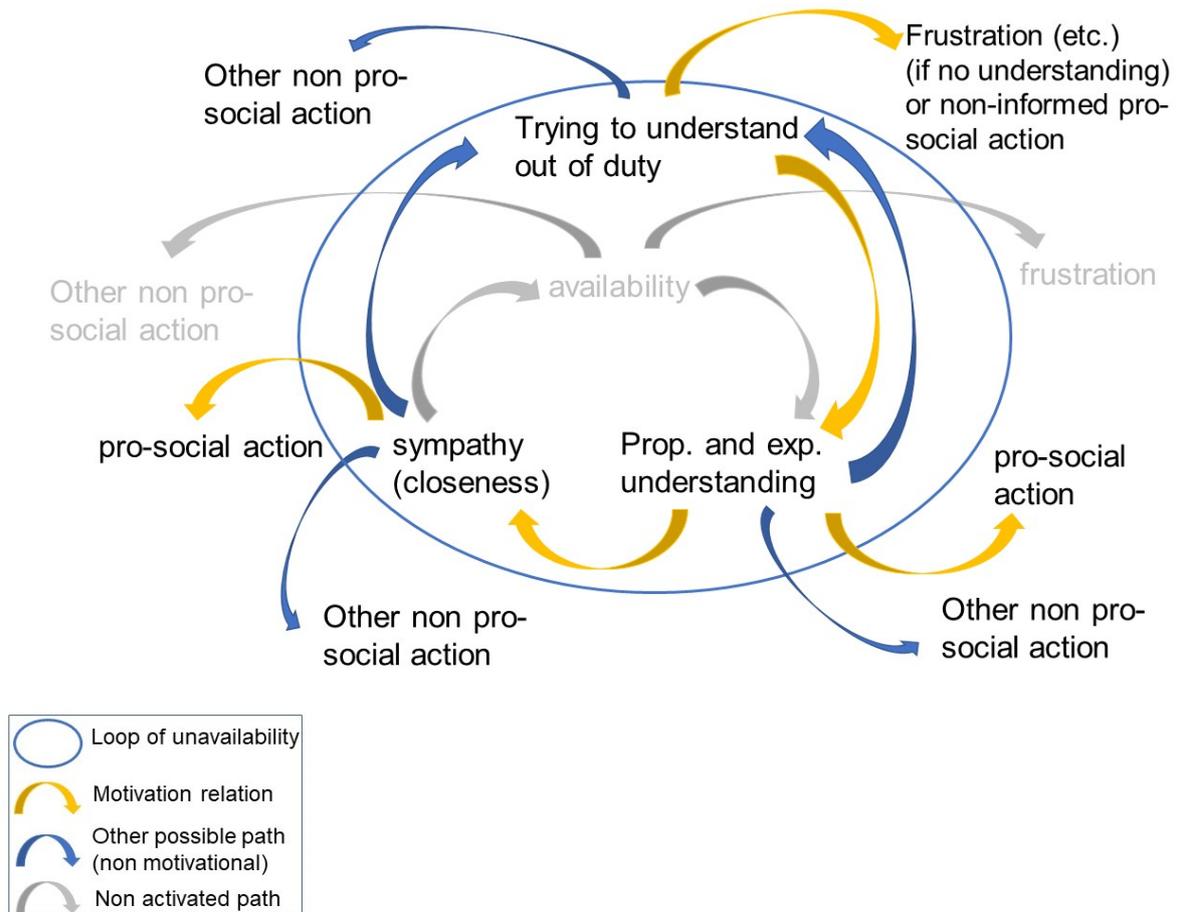
#### *The added value of availability*

There are two advantages of being available rather than trying to understand someone for another purpose (e.g. duty). The first one is that availability is easier and more motivating. The second is that only availability leads to the feelings of closeness. To see this, we need to compare those two possibilities.



*Figure 4. Loop of availability: model representing the motivational loop between availability, understanding and sympathy. Other paths are also represented. At any point, one can be motivated by the valuing to do a pro-social action for the person who is the object of availability or terminate the motivational path and do something else.*

First, the one who is available is in what I will call the “loop of availability” (Figure 4 above). What I mean by that is that when we are available to another, we are motivated by our valuing of that person to try to understand her, which hopefully leads us to understand her propositionally and experientially, which elicits sympathy for her (when her situation is not neutral), which sustains our valuing of her and can further motivate us to try to understand this person, etc. It is a loop of availability because each element motivates the following one in a circular way. This loop enhances our chances to understand another by sustaining our availability, but it also sustains the feeling of sympathy and of closeness. We can stay in the loop until we decide to do something else (or are caught up by something else) and thus stop being available. At any point of the loop, we can be motivated by our valuing or our sympathy to do something else for the other person than understanding her (another pro-social action). For example, having achieved a satisfactory understanding of the person we are available to, we can decide to take action to help her. Alternatively, we can put an end to that motivational path and decide to do something else entirely, for example, leave for our next appointment. The possibility that availability does not lead to an enhanced understanding of the other person thus leaving us frustrated with that person or judging her is also represented.



*Figure 5. Loop of unavailability: model representing the paths that the one who is unavailable and who, in this case, is motivated by a sense of duty, can take to sustain her effort of understanding of someone.*

When we are not available, by contrast, we are motivated to understand someone for another purpose than a valuing of her (in Figure 5 above, a sense of duty). To understand that person propositionally and experientially, we can try to take her perspective. If we succeed, and this person is in a non-neutral situation, this then leads us to feel sympathy and thus to value that person (this is discussed further in chapter 5, [section 5.3.3](#)). From there, there are several possible paths. We can be moved by the activated valuing of the other person to keep understanding her and thereby get in the loop of availability (possibility not represented in Figure 5). Alternatively, we can come back to our original motive and be motivated to understand that person further, thus creating a loop. Again, we can also at any point take a way out and be motivated (e.g. by our sense of duty) to act pro-socially or do something else entirely. The loop created in unavailability is not completely motivational because sympathy does not sustain our further motive like our sense of duty. This implies that to keep trying to understand someone, we need to end the motivational path and come back to our original motive.

The main difference between sustained availability and sustained effort to understand someone out of a sense of duty is that in the first case, we are in a motivation loop. Every element motivates the next one so that we do not have to provide a further effort to redirect or recall our motivation. When we are not available, we are not, so to say, “in the flow”. The person we are trying to understand does not by herself sustain our attention. We have to remind ourselves of our original motive so as to be motivated to continue to understand that person further. This loop thus requires more effort on our part and therefore is probably less efficient. Our attention might be scattered between the person we are trying to understand and the further goal that motivates us, which might also impact our understanding. When we are in the loop of availability, however, the person we are trying to understand also motivates us to do so; the motivation is endogenous.

Furthermore, very often, when we try to understand someone for a further purpose but find ourselves understanding her propositionally and experientially, thereby feeling sympathy and closeness, we become interested in that person for herself and this motivates us to further understand her. Our original motive still motivates us, but at that moment, we do not need it because we are moved by our interest for that person. Think for example of the social scientist conducting qualitative interviews to study divorce. Even if, at first, it is her desire to conduct her study that motivates her, once she starts to understand her interviewees, feels empathy and sympathy for them, she starts wanting to know more about them for themselves and that becomes momentarily her main motivation. She is hooked on their stories, although her original desire still plays a motivating role.

If we are in the loop of unavailability, however, it means that this did not happen. Despite feeling empathy and sympathy for that person, we have not become interested enough in that person to be motivated to understand her for her sake and we remain motivated mainly by our further purpose. Such cases might happen if the situation of the other person does not invite much sympathy, if we did not successfully understand that person or if our desire to fulfil our further purpose is very strong. In any case, this suggests that there is little sympathy and little closeness experienced and, in many cases, not enough of them to make a difference. We remain at a distance, engaging in the endeavour to understand the other person in a rather detached way. This low level of sympathy and of concern for that person for herself is likely to be perceived by her and, if she does, she will not feel understood and cared for. If she picks on the fact that the other person is trying to understand her out of sheer curiosity or to do her duty, she might also resent the other person for not being concerned about her. This will hinder their relationship.

If we are in the loop of availability, however, we are moved by sympathy and by our valuing of the other person. Even if the situation of the other person does not invite much sympathy, we can feel close to her because we understand her (see [chapter 5](#)) and be moved

solely by our pre-existent valuing of that person. We are engaging with the other person for herself out of concern for her. We can thus feel close to her and the understood one can feel valued and cared for. Also, because we are in the loop of availability, these feelings are sustained, which enhances the chance of them having an impact on us and on the understood one. If we are available for an instant only (for one loop), we have lower chances to understand the other, but in addition, the experience of the feelings elicited might be too short for us to become aware of them and to be impacted by them. In such cases, the other person will not be able to pick up on them and will not feel understood and cared for.

The claims made here are in need of empirical verification, but at this stage, it seems that even if availability is an easier and more effective option, we can come to understand another and be motivated to act on that understanding to help that person through the loop of availability as well as through the loop of unavailability. However, only the loop of availability will make us feel substantially close to that person and will make her feel understood and cared for, hence helping us bond. Availability thus has a pro-social advantage in terms of relationship development. This is why it plays an important role in our social lives.

#### **4.3.2 Availability vs. Empathy and Sympathy**

At this point, we might want to compare the effects and the role of availability with the ones of empathy and sympathy. We saw in [chapter 3](#) that availability is intimately related to affective and cognitive empathy as well as to sympathy. However, in the introduction, I claimed that availability responds to a need that neither affective empathy nor sympathy can fulfil. We can now see why this is the case.

##### *Availability vs. Empathy*

Let us start with affective empathy. We have seen that affective empathy is an important aspect of availability since it enables experiential understanding. However, on its own, it is insufficient to come to a good understanding of another. If we experience automatic empathy by seeing someone suffering or undergoing a certain emotion, what we learn is only what that person is feeling, but not what the feeling is about and nothing about her general perspective. Alternatively, if we feel affective empathy through perspective taking, then we need to already have an understanding of that person's situation to guide the process. Affective empathy is thus little informative regarding the perspective of the person we feel empathy for.

Affective empathy does not involve a valuing of the target. However, as we have seen, it leads to such a valuing, which can motivate us to pay attention to someone to understand her. Affective empathy can thus “get us into the loop” of availability, as explained above. Affective empathy can therefore be a valuable way to become available, but its role is different

from the one of availability since, on its own, it is not very informative regarding the perspective of the person we feel empathy for.

Cognitive empathy is also part of availability since it refers to the processes used to understand others propositionally. Unlike availability, however, cognitive empathy does not specify what motivates one to understand another, so that the one who displays only cognitive empathy might not be in the best position to understand that person's perspective – she might want to avoid a lawsuit or find that person's weaknesses). Furthermore, what motivates us to display cognitive empathy might not motivate us to understand that person experientially. Hence, the role of cognitive empathy is purely epistemic: it enables us to propositionally understand another better. Further effects depend on the motivation to perform cognitive empathy. It thus does not reliably lead to experiential understanding nor to the motivation to develop a good relationship with that person or to help her.

#### *Availability vs. sympathy*

Sympathy involves a valuing of its target and, hence can motivate us to do different things for her. It can motivate us to understand that person further, in which case we become available or it can motivate us to do something else for that person, for example, help her. However, sympathy on its own does not help us understand others better. Rather, it informs us on how we evaluate someone's situation. It can therefore arise only on a previous understanding of someone's situation. As a result, sympathy cannot provide the effects of understanding described above. Although sympathy is popular because it motivates helping actions, if there is no prior satisfactory understanding of that person's need, the helping actions motivated by sympathy will not be effective. Thus, because of its valuing component, sympathy plays an important motivating role, but without complementation in terms of understanding of the other person, it is not very effective.

The effects of availability are thus different from the ones of cognitive and affective empathy and sympathy because it involves both the motivational component of sympathy and the understanding components of cognitive and affective empathy. It is this unique combination that makes it important to our social lives.

### **4.3.3 Examples of the Practical Role of Availability**

The discussion in this chapter has been quite abstract and general so far. In this subsection, I would like to illustrate the role and importance of availability more practically by discussing further some examples already mentioned and by describing what degree of availability is effective in those situations. We can start with the paradigmatic example of two friends meeting, as one of them is facing a difficult situation. Recall the example of Sandrine and Milena. Milena has always dreamt about becoming a journalist and did everything it takes to

get there. She just finished a six-month internship at a big newspaper where she worked hard to show her worth. Her superiors appreciated her work and encouraged her to apply for a job opening that they had in the same division. But then, her application was rejected. Milena is starting to doubt her talent as a journalist, and she is extremely depressed by this news. She then meets with Sandrine, her very close friend from college who has been supporting her all along the way. If Sandrine is available to Milena and shows that she understands her and supports her, Milena will feel understood, cared for. She feels that she has support, someone to rely on and who believes in herself. She finds some solace in her relationship with Sandrine. Sandrine herself feels very sorry for Milena. She understands how she feels and even feels it herself. She cares deeply for Milena and is determined to support her and to help her overcome this difficult obstacle. She will slowly build her morale and confidence up and motivate her to keep going to work for her dream. This is a difficult and painful situation, but it brings them closer and makes their relationship stronger. If Sandrine had not been available to Milena, if she could not understand her or could not find the resources inside her to be “there” for Milena and instead kept thinking about her own career, she would not have felt closer to Milena. Milena would not have felt understood and cared for. Milena might have been frustrated with Sandrine. In any case, she would not have felt supported, and understood. She would have felt very alone with her feelings of depression and the oppression in her chest. Milena would have felt worse and their relationship would have suffered as well.

In that case, the degree of availability that is required from Sandrine for it to be effective is quite high. First, Milena experiences her situation as quite serious. She is depressed, and the rejection of her application is a very difficult pill to swallow. Furthermore, Milena and Sandrine have been very close friends for at least five years. Because of this, Milena expects Sandrine to listen to her fully, to really care about what is happening to her. If Sandrine is distracted or does not seem very keen on understanding what Milena is experiencing, Milena would not only feel not understood and cared for, but she would also feel hurt. Even if Sandrine’s degree of availability was not very high, she could understand Milena and feel some compassion for her. However, this would not make her feel closer to Milena since they are, usually, much closer.

The relational value of availability is important not only with friends, but in many different types of situations. Psychotherapy is, of course, another example. Whether it leads to more than the effects described here and also allows the patient to evolve, as Rogers claim it does, need to be further inquired. Furthermore, feeling understood and valued can matter as well at the workplace, for instance when we try to present new ideas or even in very brief functional interactions. For example, if we are facing administrative issues with a resident permit, dealing with a clerk who seems to understand our situation and who shows regard rather than with a clerk that treats us as a number and who is completely indifferent to our difficulties can

tremendously help. Those situations will require rather medium degrees of valuing and attention for availability to produce its relational benefits. The clerk does not need to value us very much, nor to pay attention to us very intensely or for long, for us to feel understood, because our expectations are very low.

In the examples just outlined, the value of availability is mainly relational. In other situations, availability is valuable because it enables efficient helping by providing the available one with an accurate understanding of the other person's need and a motivation to help her. The example of the child who does not want to go to school can serve to illustrate this. Imagine that Clement has a son, Leo who does not want to go to school. Every day, he complains about it and sometimes, he even throws a tantrum in the hope of not having to go to school. Clement is worried about the situation and it pains him to have to force his son to go to school against his will. Clement obviously values his son a lot. How he handles the situation will, however, depends on how much he tries to understand his son. He might assume that his son does not like school because it is not entertaining and that he likes playing better. In that case, he will just keep repeating to his son that he is sorry he does not like school, but he has to go. If he is more available to his son, he might try to understand what his son is experiencing and especially what he is experiencing at school that makes him not like it. He might ask Leo about school, about the teacher, classmates, etc. to find out what bothers him. He might also call the teacher to discuss Leo's behaviour in class and his relations with his classmates. By doing so, he might find out that Leo is being bullied by other classmates, that the teacher once said mean words to him and he is now afraid, or that he has sensory hypersensitivity that makes the school environment extremely uncomfortable for him. If Clement can understand why Leo does not want to go to school, he will be able to devise a plan to solve Leo's problem or at least to improve his situation, thereby making Leo's school situation better and less uncomfortable.

For Clement to be able to help his son, his degree of availability needs to be high. Clement's degree of valuing is naturally high because he cares for his son deeply. But more importantly, his degree of attention needs to be high for him to be able to help his son efficiently. If Clement only pays attention to Leo's frustration without inquiring further and assuming that he simply does not like school, he might miss the opportunity to really help his son. In such cases, the degree of attention of availability needs to be high for it to deliver and produce efficient helping behaviour. The degree of valuing in those situations admits of more fluctuations. In this example, Clement values Leo a lot because he is his son. In another context, with a stranger, a client or a patient, the degree of valuing will be lower, but it can still be sufficient to motivate efficient help. It is not necessary to love someone deeply to be motivated to understand her problem and to be motivated to do something about it. A salesperson, for example, can be motivated to help a customer and find the product that will

best fit her needs, with quite a low level of valuing. Availability can benefit any complex helping situations where what the person to be helped needs is not directly obvious.

With these examples, I hope to have illustrated what the effects, and hence the importance, of availability can be in practice. As explained several times, this does not imply that there is always an added value of being available, nor that a higher degree of availability is always better. There are many situations where understanding another's perspective is not the priority. For example, being available to a stranger in the bus who does not want to interact with anyone might not produce much benefit. Similarly, when someone is having a heart attack, it will be more beneficial to call the emergency services rather than or before trying to understand that person's experiences. Sometimes, availability can nevertheless have a surprised value, as when we unexpectedly find ourselves having a deep and meaningful conversation with a stranger met in a park. Because of its benefits described above, availability can play an important role in professions with strong relational or helping components. As an example, the value of availability to the domain of health care will be explored in more depth in [chapter 6](#).

#### **4.4 Success Conditions for Positive Effects of Availability**

Above, I have argued that the main effect of availability is to lead to an accurate understanding of another which induces several social benefits, including making the target of availability feel understood and cared for. However, availability does not always deliver those benefits. We saw in chapter 2 section [2.4.1](#), that coming to an accurate understanding of the person we are paying attention to is not a satisfaction condition of availability. Even if it puts us in a very good position to understand another, we might nevertheless find ourselves unable to understand someone or think that we have come to an understanding when in fact, we have not. In this section, I would like to explore the main conditions that need to be satisfied for availability to deliver an accurate understanding of another person and to make this other person feel understood.

##### *Inability to understand the other*

Becoming available to another is not always sufficient for achieving a good understanding of that person. We might not have access to a sufficient and accessible source of information enabling us to learn enough about the other person's situation and perspective to understand it. The other person might not want to disclose herself and be understood. She might speak another language, or she might be deceased. We might also have access to a sufficient source of information but have a low degree of attention and fail to catch that information. We might for example listen with one ear and be distracted by incoming texts or emails.

Even if we are able to access all the relevant information needed to understand someone, we might nevertheless be unable to make sense of that information. We might not manage to reconstruct the other person's perspective as a coherent whole. What we understand of another depends a lot on our experience and personality. Ingrid, for example, might be unable to understand how jealousy can bring someone to hurt one's partner because for her, love and violence are incompatible. She understands that this happens, and that jealousy is the cause of much violence, but it does not make sense to her. Vera, however, might think it makes perfect sense because she knows how love can make someone possessive and how, when threatened it can make someone violent. This does not mean that Vera would herself hurt her partner out of jealousy or has done it, nor approves of it. Perhaps she has already been angry at someone because she was jealous of her and this is enough for her to understand that the same can happen at a much higher intensity, bringing someone to act extremely violently. How we understand or fail to understand others will be further discussed in the [next chapter](#).

In those cases, being available does not result in a sufficient or good understanding of another and will not bring about sympathy and closeness. It will rather leave the available one with frustration of not being able to understand or puzzlement at the seeming incoherence of the other person's perspective. We might still be able to sympathise with the other person if we understand enough of her to see if she is in a good or bad situation, but we will not know how to react and how to help. In such cases, availability has no epistemological value.

*The Recipient does not perceive the other person as available*

As mentioned above, for the recipient to enjoy the positive effects of availability, she must perceive that the other person understands her experientially. Otherwise, she will not feel valued and understood. This means that the recipient must be in a state and a position enabling her to do that. Obviously, if the recipient is in a coma, or asleep, it will not be possible. She also must have the mental ability to understand that she is being valued and understood. Perhaps that makes newborns and some animals unable to enjoy felt understanding. There must also be a way for the recipient to perceive the other person or communicate with her. If Sandrine is available to Milena but is staying home rather than joining Milena for coffee, Milena will not know that Sandrine is available to her (unless they are communicating through another media).

Furthermore, we usually feel valued and understood when we feel that someone values and pays attention to us *enough*. In other terms, the other's degree of availability and understanding needs to match our expectations. For example, if Ousmane and Joel are strangers seated next to each other in a plane, Ousmane very likely expects little availability from Joel. If Ousmane sees that Joel is quite interested in what he is saying, paying average attention and seeming to care a little, which would correspond to a low or medium degree of

availability, Ousmane will think that Joel is available to him. However, if Joel is not a stranger but Ousmane's life partner, Ousmane might feel hurt that Joel does not seem to care more about him and that Joel is not paying enough attention to him. Ousmane will then be disappointed or angry at Joel and will not experience the positive effects of availability. How much availability we expect from the other will depend on the relationship with have with that person (stranger vs. partner) and the stringency of our situation.

Also, if a degree of availability lower than expected might be disappointing and not deliver the positive aspects of availability, it is possible that a degree of availability too high with respect to one's expectations might have the same result. It seems that very often, a higher degree of availability than expected will be a good surprise. We usually do not mind, and rather like it, when people value us and are interested in us more than we expected. But there might be a threshold above which we might find another's degree of availability inappropriate and dislike it, thus failing to experience the positive effects of availability. For example, say again that Joel and Ousmane are strangers sitting next to each other in the train and Ousmane starts telling Joel about himself, where he is from and what he does for a living. If Joel shows tremendous interest in that, acting like if Ousmane was telling Joel the most interesting thing in the world and asking more and more questions to learn about him and his current situation, Ousmane might start to think Joel's behaviour is odd, or suspicious, and feel social awkwardness or even distrust rather than feeling valued and understood. Thus, whether we experience the positive effects of availability depends on whether the other's degree of availability matches our expectations.

Similarly, we are dissatisfied when someone's understanding of us is below our expectation. We see that her understanding is only partial and is not the one we want to have, and we do not really feel understood and do not feel the positive effects described above. We often blame the other person for not paying attention enough, for not trying hard enough or for not being understanding enough. This brings out feelings of frustration, anger, impatience. In short, we tend to feel negative emotions towards the other person which separates us from her. We can feel isolated, different, because the other person cannot understand us. Sometimes, we can still feel touched by someone's sympathy, by her intention to understand us or her good will, even if she does not understand us, especially if she is not at fault for not understanding us. This can be the case for example when a child is unable to understand the complexity of her parent's situation and asks them if they are sad because Moona, their cat, does not want to play with them, because that what makes her sad sometimes. The parents will not feel understood but will likely be moved by their child's sympathy. Most often, however, the belief that another does not understand us will bring about negative emotions and negative thoughts about this person, and perhaps ourselves. Thus, in order to benefit from the positive

effects of availability, we need to be under the impression that the other person's degree of understanding is satisfying.

If all those conditions are satisfied, the recipient of availability is a position to see, through the other person's posture, expressions, gestures, and words, whether they value and understand her. The benefits of availability can then be enjoyed by both the available one and the recipient of availability. Otherwise, availability will not deliver its positive effects and both the available one and its recipient will rather be left with negative emotions, judgements about each other, which will bring more distance between them. An accurate and sufficient understanding of another that is perceived in that way by that other is thus a critical element for good relationships with others.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

Understanding others play a very important role in our lives. It enables us to connect with others and to develop relationships with them. Availability puts us in a good position to understand someone because when we are available, we are actively trying to understand that person. Furthermore, the valuing of availability motivates us to take the perspective of the other and thus to come to an experiential understanding of her, making us feel empathy and sympathy for her. Availability is not the only way to reach such an understanding of others. However, being and staying available over time sustains the feelings of sympathy and closeness with the other that arise from understanding her and enables her to feel understood. Availability thus plays an important role in our social lives, because it allows us to bond with others. It is especially important in direct encounters when someone is sharing her experience and expects sustained attention and understanding.

There could also be further effects of availability. For example, Rogers argues that the perception that someone is available to us and the feeling of being understood, valued, and accepted as we are, is conducive to positive change in ourselves (Rogers 1961).

Lastly, although I have stated in [chapter 1](#), that the normativity of availability will not be treated in this dissertation, it seems important to point out that availability can also seem valuable for normative reasons. Above, I have attempted to establish the importance of availability purely in terms of its practical effects on the one who understand, the one who is understood, and their relationship. But for many, and this was the case of some of the authors presented in [chapter 1](#), availability is also important because it is morally good. If someone has value, then availability might be seen as the appropriate (moral) response to this person. If we try to understand them for other reasons, it might show that we do not recognise her value as a human being and do not respond appropriately to it, and hence do not respect it. If

we think that every person or sentient being is valuable, then valuing them might always be called for. The attitude of availability could thus be seen as intrinsically good.

## 5. Availability and Intersubjectivity

In the [previous chapter](#), I described the effects of availability and argued that it plays an important role in our relationships with others. In this chapter, I would like to further our understanding of those effects by exploring in more detail what understanding another consists in and why it leads to feeling close to the person understood. Furthermore, here is also the place to inquire into what Marcel, Buber, Murdoch, and Rogers claim is another effect of availability: seeing the other person as a subject. Because Marcel is the one who defends this claim in most length, we will focus on his account.

I will argue that it is not completely clear from Marcel's account how to understand the claim that when we are available, we see others as subjects, while when unavailable, we see them as objects. However, a detailed description of propositional and experiential understanding will enable me to go further and to show that propositional understanding often leads to an experience of others as "like us" and as belonging to the same community, while failures to propositionally understand them make us experience them as different from us and reject them. Experiential understanding gives us an experience of the subjectivity of others through perspective taking – at least it gives us the impression that we do. By contrast, when we are not available, we can only see, or infer, *that* others are subjects. Experiential understanding also leads us to see others as mattering, in the same way that we matter. As a result, when we are available to others and manage to understand them both experientially and propositionally, we come to see others as subjects, who are significantly similar to us and who matter in the same way as we do.

To carry out that agenda, I will start by describing Marcel's account of the change that availability operates on the way we see the other. To further elucidate his claim, I will need to explore what it is to understand someone propositionally and experientially in more detail than in [chapter 4](#). I will start with propositional understanding and describe what it is and what its effects on the one who understands are. I will then proceed similarly with experiential understanding. I will conclude by explaining that those effects of propositional and experiential understanding show why availability is important to our social lives and will discuss briefly the limitations of availability.

## 5.1 Marcel's Account of Intersubjectivity as Reciprocal Availability

According to Marcel, when we are available to another, we see each other as persons, whereas when we are unavailable, we see each other as objects (Marcel 1997, 220-23 II; 2001, 121, 188; 1964, 60). It seems quite convincing that availability has an impact on how we see or relate with the other. Whether we pay attention to someone or not, whether we value that person, are indifferent to her, or even devalue her, certainly changes how we relate to that person. However, it is not clear what that change exactly is and how it amounts to the change from seeing another as an object to seeing another as subject. Being unavailable to someone certainly does not imply seeing the other as a thing. In fact, the other being a conscious subject might even be at the centre of our experience of the other person while unavailable. When we are angry at someone because she insulted us, we are unavailable to her, but our anger makes sense only considering the fact that we take that person to be a conscious being. If we thought the other was a machine randomly associating words to create sentences, we would not feel insulted by the injurious sentence.

Let us see how Marcel explains this. He describes in more length how unavailability makes us see others as objects than how availability makes us see others as subjects. According to him, when we are available, we are typically not interested in the other for herself, but for self-regarding reasons, because we want or need something from them. For example, when we ask a stranger in the street for directions, we are not interested in that person, but in finding our way. There are many things that we can need from the other that can motivate us to turn to them. Objects (money, food), service, information are obvious examples, but love, recognition, gratitude, respect, etc. are also often looked for in others. When such self-regarding needs motivate our interest others, we are, according to Marcel, using others as tools or as means to an end. Marcel gives the example of "false modesty" (Marcel 1951a, 4). Someone who pretends the song she wrote is not good just to earn more praises is in fact using others as an "echoing amplifier" or a mirror supposed to reflect back the recognition that this person is looking for (Marcel 1951a, 23). The person to whom I ask directions in the street is just a "signpost" to me (Marcel 1950, 179). "From the very fact that I treat the other person merely as a means of resonance or an amplifier, I tend to consider him as a sort of apparatus which I can, or think I can, manipulate, or of which I can dispose at will" (Marcel 1951a, 17). When I do so, I treat the other person as if she existed for me (Marcel 1951a, 19), and was at my disposal, as if she did not exist for herself. Thus, for Marcel, as soon as our interest in another is not disinterested, we are seeing and treating the other person, at least partly, as an object.

Marcel mentions judging and categorising others as a second way of relating with them as objects. When we do that, we put a tag on others as if they were things we could put in a

box once and for all. When we qualify others in that way, we see others as fixed and determined beings and we fail to see that they are free beings that can evolve and change at all time. Freedom is a core characteristic of ours that distinguishes us from purely mechanistic and determined things (Marcel 1997, 84 II; 1958, 154). When we judge others, we deny them this freedom, fail to treat them as subjects, and thereby treat them as objects.

It seems that for Marcel, *treating* another as an object amounts to *seeing* that person as an object. It seems either that we can treat as objects only beings that we see as objects, or that by treating others as objects, we come to see them as objects. Which option is the correct one is, however, not clear. Furthermore, it seems that for Marcel, we see another as an object as soon as we attribute a property that is characteristic of things to that person, such as “that can be used”, “is at my disposal”, “fixed and determined being”. As a result, and this is consistent with the examples Marcel gives, seeing another as an object does not mean seeing that person as a thing or as a zombie. There is no contradiction between seeing the other as an object in the sense of using that person as a means, and in other respects seeing that person as a subject and asking her questions, looking for her love and approbation, etc. Seeing another as an object thus seems to rather mean denying the other one of the core characteristics of subjects.

Cases where we are interested in others for egoistic motives and where we judge people are paradigmatic cases of unavailability for Marcel. It seems, however, that there are other cases that do not satisfy our definition of availability, and thus are cases of unavailability, and yet, that do not fit into those categories. For example, when we value someone but are not trying to understand that person because we are focused on helping her or because we think we already know what she feels and needs, we are not available (at least according to our definition given in [chapter 2](#)) and yet we do not seem to be treating the other person as an object in Marcel’s sense. We are not using that person as a means to an end, and we are not judging her. Since Marcel considered only paradigmatic cases such as those presented above, it is not clear how he would have treated such cases. It is clear, however, that not all cases of unavailability (as I have defined it) amount to seeing the other person as an object in Marcel’s sense.

Let us move forward then to availability and seeing the other person as a subject. It results from the description above that we see and treat another as a subject when we are interested in that person for herself and when we see that she is a free being. Since being available consists in paying attention to someone mainly because we value that person for herself, availability satisfies at least the first condition for seeing another as a subject. However, this is not sufficient to explain why availability enables us to see another as a subject. We can be interested in many things for themselves without seeing them as subjects, such as a work of art or a scientific field. This might be why we need the second condition: seeing the other as

a free being. But it is not obvious how we see the other as free when available. Let us look at the experience of availability.

Marcel describes the way we see the other person when we are available to her in the following way: when we are available, the other person becomes “real” and we see her as a “presence”, as a “you” (Marcel 1998, 232; 1997, 194). Then we feel connected, together, as fellow-creatures (Marcel 1997, 20). There are two aspects of this experience: the first is that when we are available, the other person is perceived as another “centre” of experience and meaning (Marcel 1997, 58 II; 2001, 186). What this means is that we become acutely aware that the other person is to herself and to her environment what I am to myself and my environment. The other person experiences her world in the same way as I experience mine and things matter to her as they matter to me. This is the opposite experience to the one of taking another to exist for me, to be at my disposal, like a thing would be<sup>16</sup>. Thus, through availability, the other person is perceived as a centre of experience and meaning, which typically characterises subjects. The second aspect is that through availability, we make the experience of community with the other. Marcel says that we are “with” the other person. In French, unlike in English, things cannot be with another, they can only be juxtaposed alongside each other. In French, we will say that Samuel is with Eloïse, but we cannot say that the glasses are with the newspaper on the table. Thus, by becoming available to another, we come to share something with her. Although it is not clear whether this amounts to seeing her as free, we can see why Marcel says that we see the other person as a subject when available since another subject is another centre of experience, that exists for herself, but with whom I can interact, relate, and be with.

Marcel does not describe further the experience of the other person as a subject, since this experience is a “mystery” (cf. [chapter 1](#)) and cannot be analysed without being violated. He relies on the fact that the reader will understand what he is saying from her own experience. He thus does not explain how it is that availability makes us see others as their own centres and as fellow-beings. However, he does hint at something that can be helpful: at several points, Marcel mentions the fact that to see another as a subject, we have to put ourselves in her place (Marcel 1997, 195) and make the other person’s experience ours (Marcel 1999, 78). This suggests that he considers that empathy plays a key role in making us see the other as another “centre”. I believe, indeed, that we can see why availability makes us see others as their own centres and as fellow-beings if we look into how we experience others when we understand them, including when we experientially understand them through perspective taking.

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<sup>16</sup> When we are interested in others for instrumental reasons (to manipulate them, etc.) or out of sheer curiosity, we see them as objects and what they feel is not real to us. However, this can change. Especially if we are trying to “see through their eyes”, others can suddenly become real to us (Marcel 1999, 79). We have then become available.

In the remaining of this chapter, I will argue that when we understand someone both propositionally and experientially, we experience that person as (1) someone who is like us, (2) an experiencing subject, and (3) someone that matters. To carry out that agenda, we need a more detailed description of what it means to understand another both propositionally and experientially than the one provided in [chapter 4](#). I start by inquiring about propositional understanding and its effects, before turning towards experiential understanding and its effects.

## 5.2 Propositional Understanding and Its Effects

### 5.2.1 What Is Propositional Understanding?

In [chapter 4](#), I explained that we have a propositional understanding of another if we have identified that person's most relevant mental states and can see how they all "hang together". Here, I would like to describe further what it means to see how mental states "hang together". My method will be descriptive. I will start from example to see what it is to understand (propositionally) another. Note that my object of inquiry is interpersonal understanding once we know what state someone is in. I am not trying to describe how we proceed to identify or predict other people's mental state.

#### *Understanding a mental state*

Understanding someone's perspective on a certain object (political views, values, etc.) can be a very intricate endeavour because we have to identify all the relevant mental states that this person has about that object and see how they hang together. To make the task of describing interpersonal understanding more feasible, I start by focusing on the understanding of a particular mental state. We can then extrapolate from this description what it is to understand a set of related mental states.

Let us start with the understanding of actions. We usually understand someone's action by understanding her intention. To see what that means, let us start with a simple example. Let's say a friend of ours, Isabella, tells us that she intends to buy a fitness subscription later that day. In that case, we *know* that she has the intention to do that. To *understand* that intention<sup>17</sup>, however, we will need to know why Isabella intends to buy the fitness subscription. What we are looking for in such cases is usually another mental state such as a desire (to be healthy, to get stronger, or to lose weight) or/and a belief (that going to the gym is a way to be healthy, to get stronger or to lose weight). On the Humean view, both a desire and a belief are

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<sup>17</sup> The question I address here is not the one of social cognition or of access to other minds. I am not asking how we come to know about another's mental state, but rather, once we know that another has certain mental state, what it is to understand it.

necessary for motivation. That means that Isabella would not intend to buy a gym subscription if she did not want to be healthy or if she did not believe going to the gym regularly is a way to be healthy.

Interestingly, we often do not need to be told both the belief and the desire that motivated an intention to understand it. If Isabella tells us that she wants to be healthy, we infer that she also believes that going to the gym is a way to be healthy. Alternatively, if she only tells us that exercising regularly is important for health, we will infer that she wants to be healthy. The belief and the desire that motivate an intention are connected in that the belief explains why doing the intended action is a way to satisfy the belief. The fact that exercising regularly is good for health explains why going to the gym is a way to be healthy. As a result, although we need a belief and a desire to understand someone else's intention, as they are connected, one is often enough to explain the intention because the other can be easily deduced. There are some cases, however, where the desire or the belief will not be sufficient, and further explanation will be required. For example, if Isabella tells us that she is buying a gym subscription because she wants to have a baby, we might not understand straightaway what having a baby has to do with exercising. We might need to learn from her that being overweight lowers the chances of conceiving to understand her intention. In general, what we are looking for to understand an intention is an explanation in terms of belief + desire. We then understand Isabella's intention to buy a fitness subscription if we see her belief and desire "hang together" and provide her with a motivation to buy a fitness subscription.

Hence, we are trying to understand that intention by explaining it<sup>18</sup>. What is interesting is that when we are trying to understand someone, we are looking at a particular type of explanation. We are not trying to understand what happens at the physical or chemical level, nor at the neurological level. In daily life, the fact that some particular neurons fired or that a substance like serotonin was produced does not help us understand someone's intention to buy a gym prescription. What we are looking for is rather an explanation in terms of motivation. We are looking for a motivating desire and a motivating reason. Motivating reasons are considerations in light of which someone forms an intention, holds a belief or another mental state (Alvarez 2010). In this case, we want to know what consideration Isabella saw as speaking in favour of buying a gym subscription and which made her form the intention to do so. In this case, considering her desire to be healthy, the fact that exercising regularly by going to the gym is a way to be healthy provided her with a reason to buy a gym subscription and motivated her to do so.

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<sup>18</sup> By explaining, here, I only mean making the action intelligible. Whether that fact also plays a causal role is a further question. For a thorough discussion of what an action explanation is, see Sandis 2012a.

Before going further, it is important to see that motivating reasons are not always normative reasons. What someone takes to be a reason to believe, desire, or do X and that motivates her to do so might not be a normative reason, either because the reason is based on a false consideration or because it does not speak (sufficiently) in favour of believing, desiring, or doing X. For example, Isabella might want to buy a gym subscription because she thinks going to the gym will make her rich, which is false. If that was true, though, it would be a good reason to go to the gym. Alternatively, Isabella might want to buy a gym subscription because it was written in her horoscope that she should do so. In that case, even if this is true, it is not a good, or sufficient, reason to buy a gym subscription (or to do anything for that matter).

As agents, we act according to what seems the case to us and what we desire. We cannot act in light of reasons we are not aware of having. If we believe that there is a fire in the university building, it makes sense for us to turn on the alarm, exit the building and call the firefighters even if, unbeknownst to us, we are wrong about there being a fire and thus have no reason to do all these actions. If we had known that there was no fire, we would have acted differently. Accordingly, when we try to understand someone's action, we try to see what reasons she thought she had and in light of which she acted (Millar 2004). We look at how things seem (or should seem) from that person's perspective and not at how things are. Henceforth, when I speak of reasons without specifying if I speak about normative or motivating reasons, I will be referring to motivating reasons.<sup>19</sup>

As pointed out above, we understand someone's intention if we have identified the motivating reason and desire and see how they all "hang together". Knowing what motivates the other person to form an intention is only one part of understanding that intention. The motivation also has to make sense to us. It is like making a puzzle. To make a puzzle, it is not enough to know where each piece goes and where it stands towards the other (on the left, right, top, bottom). To make the puzzle, you need to see how each piece fits with the ones next to it and how together they create a coherent picture. In this case, this implies seeing how Isabella's belief that going to the gym is a way to stay healthy speaks in favour of buying a gym subscription. By opposition, if Isabella says that she is doing so because she likes painting, we know that her taste for painting is her motivating reason (assuming she really meant that), but we do not understand it because we cannot see how enjoying painting speaks in favour of buying a gym subscription. Thus, understanding someone's intention consists in seeing how

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<sup>19</sup> There is a debate regarding what a reason is, especially, regarding whether it is a fact or a mental state such as a belief. This debate is especially relevant for motivating reasons which are not always facts since we can be wrong about them being the case. However, I do not intend to solve this question here. I will speak both of the belief and of the consideration as being (motivating) reasons without adhering to a particular view on the problem, though. For a discussion of what motivating reasons are see, for example, Alvarez 2010.

certain beliefs and desires that this person has speak in favour of doing the action that person intends to do (Stueber 2010; Burge 1998).

More precisely, it involves seeing how, given a certain desire (being healthy), a certain consideration (exercising regularly is a way to be healthy) speaks in favour of doing a certain action (buying a gym subscription). By showing how doing a certain action is a way to satisfy the desire, the reason operates a transference of the desirability, or of the motivation. Sometimes, we have to reconstruct this connection. For example, if there is a fire, it gives you a reason to call the firefighters. In more detail, if you want yourself and everybody around you to be safe and there is a fire, then you and the other people around you are in danger. Firefighters put out fire and their presence minimises the chance of harm and damage as a result of the fire. Thus, calling them is the best way to avoid, or minimise harm to yourself and others around you. Luckily, we usually do not need to do all this reconstruction explicitly because we know all of this and can see straightaway how the fact that there is a fire speaks in favour of calling the firefighters. But it remains the case that to understand an intention we have to see how carrying out the action intended will promote the satisfaction of the original desire, given the reason this person has.

Furthermore, to understand Isabella's intention, we also have to see how her reason speaks *sufficiently* in favour of her buying a gym subscription. For example, if Isabella has a heart condition that makes it dangerous for her to exercise, she has a reason that speaks against her going to the gym which is stronger than her reason speaking in favour (the fact that exercising is good for health). Thus, if Isabella is aware of her condition, it would make more sense for her not to buy a gym subscription in order to be healthy. If she nevertheless intends to buy one, her intention will not be (completely) intelligible to us, because we will be unable to see why, everything considered, she thinks going to the gym can make her healthy and why she wants to do it. To understand another, we thus need not only to see the favouring relation between that person's motivating reasons and her intention, but we also need to see how, considering all that this person was aware of, there was enough, or more considerations speaking in favour of forming her intention than against. In other terms, to understand why Isabella wants to buy a gym subscription, we have to see how, from her perspective, it seemed that she had good or conclusive reasons to do so. This implies that understanding another person's intention consists in seeing how it is rational for that person to have that intention, and thus, how she seems justified in holding it.

Let us turn now to the understanding of other types of mental states. To understand other people's beliefs, we also look for an explanation, which seems to consist exclusively of reasons for believing. For example, when we ask a colleague why she believes today's colloquium has been cancelled, we expect an answer such as "we have received an email informing us of that" or "the organiser told me so". Those are possible reasons that explain to us why she holds the

belief that there will be no colloquium today. This does not mean that there is no motivating desire for holding the belief, but if there is one, it seems that it must be the desire to hold true beliefs or to know the truth. It is this desire that makes us choose to believe what seems most likely true (e.g. there will be no colloquium today) versus what is not likely to be true (e.g. the colloquium is still taking place). However, this desire seems to be motivating most, if not all, of our beliefs and as a result has no explanatory power. If we ask our colleague why she believes there will be no colloquium and she answers: “because I desire to believe the truth”, that will certainly not help us to understand her belief. When Isabella tells us that she wants to buy a gym subscription because she wants to lose weight, we can infer that she believes that going to the gym regularly is a way to lose weight. When she tells us that she believes that today’s colloquium is cancelled because she wants to know the truth, however, we cannot infer what her reason for believing is.

Thus, when trying to understand another person’s belief, we look mainly for reasons. For example, we come to see why someone believes that Q when we learn that she believes that P and also that P implies Q, because we see how those beliefs speak in favour of believing Q. Reasons for believing can thus be other beliefs, but they might also be perceptual states, like when we believe it is sunny outside because we see the sun shining. Perhaps it is also possible that we sometimes have non-epistemic reasons to believe something. For example, Jonas might choose to believe that he will succeed although the chances are low, because believing that enhances his chances of succeeding. In such a case, the desire that motivates him to believe that he will succeed is not the desire to believe the truth, but to succeed. There is a debate on whether it is possible to believe for non-epistemic reasons<sup>20</sup>. But if it is, Jonas’s belief that he will succeed even though it is not likely is intelligible if we can see how his reason, although not epistemic, speaks in favour of him holding that belief. In any case, we can understand why someone believes that P, if we can see how her motivating reasons for believing that P speak in favour of believing that P and if we can see how from that person’s perspective, it seemed that she had, everything considered, sufficient reason to believe P, i.e. if her belief is rational.

At first sight, desire might seem similar to intention. We can make sense of someone’s desire by learning about the reasons and desires that motivated it. For example, when Stella tells us she would like to learn how to knit, we might need to learn that she would like to be able to create her own pullovers or that she promised her aunt she would, to understand her desire. In that case, just like with intention, we can understand Stella’s desire if we can see how her reason for wanting to learn how to knit speaks in favour of that, given her desire (to create her own pullovers or to fulfil her promise to her aunt). However, ultimately, what makes

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<sup>20</sup> To learn more about this debate, see James 1979; Reisner 2009; Pace 2011; and Meylan 2013.

a desire intelligible is that we can see how its object is desirable. In general, we desire objects and states of affairs because they seem desirable or good to us. The desirability of the object of our desire is what makes our desire intelligible to us and to others (Anscombe 2000, 70)<sup>21</sup>. This does not mean that we desire only what seems desirable to us, but if we do desire something that does not seem desirable to us and to others, our desire will be unintelligible to us and others. It follows that to understand someone else's desire, we look at the object of desire and see if we find it desirable (for the other person) or not.

Often, we can understand other people's desires straightaway, without having to ask or look for an explanation because we can directly see how the object of the desire is desirable. When Isabella tells us that she is buying a gym subscription because she wants to be healthy, we probably do not need to ask her why she wants to be healthy, because we already see health as a desirable thing. When, on a very hot day, Marianne says that she would like a cold drink, we do not need to ask why to understand her desire because we can see what is desirable about a cold drink on such circumstances. However, some might need to ask Stella why she wants to make her own pullover, because we might not be able to see straightaway what is desirable about that.

Note that the understanding of a desire is different from the understanding of a reason. The seeing how something is desirable is different from the seeing how something speaks in favour of something else. A desire presents its object as being desirable. We understand another person's desire if we can see what is desirable about its object. Reasons work in more complex ways. First, a reason does not present itself in any way. Rather it speaks in favour of something else. For example, the fact that exercising regularly is healthy speaks in favour of exercising. Furthermore, a reason speaks in favour of believing, desiring, or doing something only considering a certain desire (or a certain good). The fact that exercising regularly is healthy is just a fact until we connect it to the desire to be healthy. What happens is that the reason lights up a path of action that leads to the satisfaction of a given desire (or the realisation of a certain good). Reasons show us ways to satisfy our desires. We then understand someone's reason for doing a certain thing if we can see how, given a certain desire, the reason speaks in favour of doing the thing. Another way to put it is to say that we understand that a reason R is a reason for an action A given a desire D, if we can see how A is a way to satisfy or is instrumental in the satisfaction of D.<sup>22</sup> We can also understand that someone takes

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<sup>21</sup> I am going to take the value appearance thesis for granted here without arguing for it. For a discussion of this thesis, see for example Lauria and Deonna 2017.

<sup>22</sup> On that view, when we ponder reasons for and against doing A, we do not confront reasons to each other. Rather, we ponder the different desires those reasons promote and the efficiency of doing A to promote these desires. For example, the fact that exercising regularly is healthy speaks in favour of buying a gym subscription given the desire to be healthy. But the facts that gym subscriptions are expensive, and that exercising is demanding speak against buying a gym subscription given the desire to spare money and to be comfortable. To decide what to do, Isabella has to ponder her desire to be

R to be a reason for  $\phi$ -ing given a desire D without understanding the desire. We can understand that  $\phi$ -ing is a way to satisfy D even if we do not understand D. For example, we can understand that the fact that a Jazz band is coming to town gives Manu a reason to buy a ticket for their concert given her desire to listen to some good Jazz Music even if we do not understand that desire. To understand that desire, we would have to see the listening of Jazz music as desirable.

Lastly, let us look at the understanding of emotions. When Albert says that he feels outraged, what do we need to understand his indignation? First, we need to know what the object of his indignation is. In this case, Albert is outraged at the Swiss Government for doing so little for the immigrants saved on the Mediterranean. If we are not aware of this problem, we might need more information about that so that we can understand why Albert believes that there are many immigrants and that Switzerland should invest itself more to help. If we know about that already, what we need to understand Albert's outrage is to see how Switzerland's involvement regarding immigrants is unfair towards the immigrants themselves and towards other Mediterranean countries. Emotions are affective reactions to certain evaluations of objects. Those evaluations are the formal objects of emotions (Deonna and Teroni 2012). When we evaluate an object as dangerous (for us), we feel fear; when we see it as admirable, we feel admiration; when we see it as shameful, we feel shame, and when we see it as unjust, we feel indignation, etc. An emotion is justified if the experiencing subject has good reasons to evaluate the object of her emotion as she does (Deonna and Teroni 2012). We can then understand why someone feels a certain emotion if we can see why she evaluates a certain object as dangerous or shameful. Thus, we understand Albert's indignation if we can see the object of his emotion as unjust. By contrast, we would not understand someone's fear of eating an ice cream because we do not see it as dangerous. We would need to learn about exceptional conditions regarding that person that would make it dangerous for her to eat ice cream to understand that person's fear.

Some emotions also have what Helm calls a focus which is a source of concern that explains why one reacts emotionally to a certain object (Helm 2007, 69). For example, Albert is outraged because he values justice. We feel fear if we or someone we love are about to fall off a cliff because we value our wellbeing and the one of the people we love. Otherwise, Albert would not care about the immigrants' situation and would not feel outraged, and we would not be afraid. Very often, we can deduce the focus of the emotion from the type of emotion and its object. We understand from Albert's outrage at Switzerland that he cares about justice and we do not need to ask him about that. We also understand his concern about justice because we

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healthy vs. her desire to spare money and to be comfortable. She also has to ponder how effective going to the gym to be healthy is vs. how much money she would spare if she did not and how uncomfortable it would be not to go.

also see it as valuable. There are cases, however, where we might need an explanation for the focus of the emotion. For example, if someone feels *schadenfreude* and rejoice over the suffering or the failure of her child, we might find it difficult to understand that person's emotion because it is not clear why that person disvalues her child wellbeing, which is quite unusual. In general, to understand someone else's emotion, we mainly need to see why she evaluates the object of her emotion as she does. In some cases, however, we might also need an explanation of why she takes the object of her emotion to be the case or of how she stands towards the focus of her emotion.

The more complex forms of interpersonal understanding, that is, the understanding of someone's point of view, story or of someone in general, seems to be constituted by the understanding of different mental states as described above. For example, the understanding of Albert's opinion that Switzerland should do more for the migrants will require an understanding of his different reasons for believing this, including his beliefs about the situation of those migrants, some political beliefs about what is the duty of a government towards people that are in need but are not its citizens, about what justice is, etc. Similarly, the understanding of an elderly person's story will involve an understanding of the most important actions she did in her life, as well as an understanding of some of her reactions to events that occurred in her life, for example.

#### *Partial understanding*

There are many cases where learning about another person's reasons for believing, intending, desiring, are not sufficient for us to fully understand the mental state in questions. Besides complete lack of understanding, such as in the case where someone believes in creationism because it is raining, there are two types of partial understanding that we can have of another person. In both cases, we can see why that person's reasons speak in favour of her holding the mental state, yet we do not completely understand why that person holds that mental state. It can be (1) that the reasons do not seem to be conclusive to us or that (2) we do not understand what that person thinks she has such a reason and it seems doubtful to us that she has good ground for that.

Let us consider the first case. Imagine that Adelaide tells us that she believes in creationism (and denies evolution) because she believes in God, that what is written in the Bible is God's Word, and since it is written in the Bible that God created heaven and earth, including humans in six days, then, that must be the case. In this situation, we can probably see why the belief in God speaks in favour of creationism. Nevertheless, Adelaide's belief in creationism might not completely make sense to us because of all the scientific evidence speaking in favour of evolution and of which the other is aware. What happens is that although we understand her reasons for believing in creationism, we do not see those reasons as conclusive, considering all the reasons Adelaide has access to. As a result, although her belief

does not seem completely unintelligible, it is nevertheless not completely clear to us why she believes in creationism. We understand her belief in creationism only partially.

In the second case, we see that someone's reasons for holding a certain mental state as conclusive, but it is not clear why this person takes herself to have those reasons. For example, say that we see Adelaide packing her things in a hurry saying that we need to leave town as soon as possible because a nuclear bomb is going to fall on it. In that case, we can probably see how Adelaide's belief gives her a conclusive reason to leave town. However, it is not clear why she thinks a nuclear bomb is going to fall on the city and it seems quite improbable that she has good reasons for believing it. Since that Adelaide's action depends on a belief that seems irrational to us, we do not completely understand her action.

One way to eliminate a (partial) lack of understanding is to look for more reasons that have been hidden from us so far. In the first type of partial understanding, we are looking for additional reasons besides the ones we already have access to. For example, a friend might tell us that she found a great apartment and will be moving next month. We see how it is a reason to move, but do not quite understand why she wants to since her current apartment is so great. The additional reason that there are problems with the foundations of her current building, and it is not safe to remain there will then make it fully intelligible to us why she wants to move. In the second type of partial understanding, we are rather looking for the other person's reasons for believing that she has the reasons that we already know about. We are going up the chain of justification. For example, we might not know that Adelaide, who is packing her things quickly, has a brother who is head of national security and who warned her of the incoming danger before broadcasting the news. In such cases, accessing those reasons might enable us to fully understand why someone is holding some mental state.

#### *Comprehensive and satisfactory understanding*

If the reasons for holding a belief or another mental state are what enables us to understand that belief, we need to learn about those reasons to understand the belief. But then, don't we need the reasons for believing that one has those reasons to understand them, etc.? I will argue that we do not, for a mental state can appear justified to us even without explicitly going back up the chain of reasons as far as possible. That is because the reasons that justify a mental state are often readily accessible to us (or we assume they are) so that we can have a complete understanding of a mental state without having to ask for the reasons and for the reasons for the reasons etc.

As explained earlier, we understand a desire to the extent that we can see what is desirable about its object and an emotion to the extent that we can see how the object of the emotions is dangerous, shameful, etc. There are thus cases where we can directly understand a mental state without needing to go back at all, like when Marianne says she would like a cold drink on a hot day. We can see what is desirable about a cold drink in that situation without

having to ask explicitly why Marianne would like a cold drink. Similarly, when someone is ashamed of stumbling on stage, we can very likely see why she sees this situation as shameful without needing further explanation.

When it is not directly clear what is desirable about someone's object of desire or what is shameful or dangerous about the object of the emotion, then we need to go back and ask for reasons, until we can see where the desirability or shamefulness lies. Then we can understand why that person is holding that mental state and we do not need to inquire further back. For instance, Lola might want to wake up at six to go out for a run, and we might not see what is desirable about that. If she explains that she wants to do this because it keeps her fit, healthy, and especially because it makes her feel good and energised for the rest of the day, then we might be able to see what is desirable about waking up at 6 to go for a run, because we see staying fit, feeling energised, etc. as desirable states. The same goes for emotions. We might not directly see why Job is sad that his best friend got her dream job, but if we come to learn that this implies that his friend will have to move far away, then we can see how that might be sad for Job and we do not need to ask Job for more explanation to understand his sadness.

The case of belief can be more difficult, since what makes a belief intelligible are exclusively its reasons. Sometimes, the chain of reasons is not very long, as when someone says that she believes it is raining because she just saw it out of the window. But even when the chain of reasons is long, we can understand others without going all the way back up the chain, because we assume a lot about what other people's reasons for believing are. For example, when Lola tells us that she wants to run early in the morning to keep fit and feel energised, we don't need to ask why she believes that running makes her fit and why she believes that she feels energised after running. We trust that she knows from experience how she feels after running, and we assume that we have common knowledge about physical activity, health and fitness and that her reasons for believing it are the same as ours. Without reasons to believe otherwise we often assume that we share a certain amount of knowledge with others and that their reasons for holding a belief are the same as ours. In such cases, we understand other people's beliefs or their reasons for believing without having to explicitly go back up the chain of reasons.

The assumption of shared knowledge thus plays an important role in understanding others' beliefs. Especially if the other person shares our culture, our education, etc., we tend to "assume that the other person shares most of our beliefs and attitudes" (Stueber 2017, 141). When we meet someone, even if it is a stranger, we assume that this person believes that the earth is not flat, that saving children is good whereas torturing them is bad, etc. We then easily understand those beliefs and do not need to look for their justification because we already see how holding those beliefs makes sense. For example, someone who also believes in

creationism will not take issue when another says that evolution did not happen and will probably not even ask why that person believes in creationism, because for her, it makes sense to believe in creationism. Someone who does not believe in creationism, however, will not directly understand that belief and might then ask for reasons.

As Stueber says, we also assume that people around us share many of our attitudes and that they are fairly rational and we use those assumptions not only to understand other people's belief, but also their desires, emotions, and intentions (Stueber 2017). When trying to understand another, we often assume that the explanation for their mental state is what we think makes most sense (Millar 2004, 219). For example, we assume that someone pressing on the stop button on the bus wants to go out, and this assumption makes that person's action intelligible to us. We assume that someone who wants to buy a fitness subscription wants to be fit and/or healthy. Because the action lies within our expectations, we do not need to inquire further to make sense of it. Thus, we do not go along questioning every intention and belief other people have because we make sense of them based on what we assume we share with them.

This implicit understanding is often made possible by a shared environment or context. As MacIntyre notices, actions are often intelligible because we take them to be part of a routine (MacIntyre 1986). Someone who wakes up early on a Monday morning, showers, has breakfast, and then goes to work will not have to explain to us why she does that. Rather, she will have to provide a reason for not waking up early and not going to work on a particular Monday morning. We often understand actions according to the culture and the practices in which the agent is involved as well as according to particular events that happened in that agent's life. By knowing about the culture, the practices, and the history of an individual beforehand, we can straightforwardly understand many of her actions (Rorty 1986).

In those cases, we can think we understand another person when in fact we do not, because our assumptions are wrong. For example, we might be in favour of presumed consent for organ donation because we believe it increases the number of donations. We will then assume that Thomas who is also in favour of presumed consent agrees with us while in fact he might disagree and be in favour of presumed consent because he thinks people's will would be better respected. Thus, our habit of understanding others by assuming their reasons are the same as ours is economical but does not always lead to accurate understanding. This is why, in situations where the accuracy of our understanding matters, it will be useful to explicitly ask the other person for her reason, or to confront our understanding with hers.

Thus, we do not always need to explicitly go back up the chains of reasons as far as we can to come to a complete understanding of others. We can often directly see why they desire something or why they are afraid of another or assume that what explains another mental state is what makes the most sense to us.

Nevertheless, even if we needed to go back up the chain of reasons to gain a complete understanding of another, we might not want to do that because we are satisfied with our partial understanding of the other person. Whether we want a complete understanding of another or not depends a lot on the context and on our aim. It might depend, for example, on how much we are interested in the person we are trying to understand. For example, if we are just having a mundane conversation with Adelaide who said that she believes in creationism because she believes in God, we might have no incentive to find out why she believes in God and why she does not take scientific evidence into account, because we might simply not care. If she is a dear friend, however, we might be interested in learning more and gaining a better understanding of her. Whether we want a complete understanding of another also depends on the aim served by this understanding. If our aim is to write a short magazine article on an artist who wrote a book about a successful lawyer who leaves everything behind to become a farmer, we might have a satisfactory understanding of why that author wrote that if she tells us she was inspired by a news story. If we are that author's psychoanalyst, however, we might want to access deeper and perhaps unconscious reasons for that as well<sup>23</sup>. Thus, it is not always useful to us to go up the chain of reasons to gain a complete understanding of another. In some situations, we can be quite satisfied with a partial understanding. When we do not need a complete understanding of another, it might be difficult to determine how much understanding we need and what mental states are needed to reach a satisfactory understanding. This is called the frame problem (Stueber 2017).

Whether our partial understanding is satisfying or not will also determine if we experience it as partial understanding or partial lack of understanding. Very often, we experience partial understanding as a lack of understanding, because as we are trying to gain understanding of an object a partial understanding is unsatisfying. For example, if we want to know why a friend stood us up last night at dinner, our friend's explanation that "she did not feel like it" will certainly not seem satisfying and we will want a further explanation. In that case, we have a partial understanding of our friends – we see how not wanting to do something speaks in favour of not doing it – but it overall seems to us that we do not understand our friend. In other cases, however, we might be satisfied with our partial understanding, so that it rather seems to us that we understand the other person. For example, we might be satisfied with Marina's explanation that she is going to buy paint because she wants to repaint her living room although we do not understand why she wants to do it. Similarly, when Eliot tells us that he does not want to order a certain dish because he does not like broccoli, we will be satisfied with this explanation even if we love broccoli and have trouble understanding how someone might not love it. We can then have the feeling that we understand Eliot, even if our understanding is only partial.

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<sup>23</sup> The context also determines the importance of the accuracy of the understanding.

### *Understanding and perspective sharing*

What the above description of interpersonal understanding suggests is that we can understand another completely only if we share that person's perspective on the object of understanding. If understanding a desire means seeing what is desirable about the object, it follows that we can understand another's desire completely only if we also see that object as desirable. If we do not see what is desirable about having a cold drink on a hot day and this cannot be explained by further desires that we do understand, then the desire for a cold drink on a hot day is unintelligible to us. The same seems to be true with emotions. To understand Lennie's shame of stumbling on stage we need to evaluate the situation as he does, that is, as shameful for him. Similarly, we can understand someone else's belief completely only if we share that person's beliefs or if we see it as justified given the other person's opinion. Hence, to understand another, we need to look at things in the same way the other person does.

In different papers bearing on interpersonal understanding and Wittgenstein, Sandis stresses the fact that we need such shared ground with another or a common form of life, to understand each other (Sandis 2019; 2015; 2012b). His position mainly stems from his view that our mental states are not locked in our private and inner minds but are apparent in our behaviour and practices (a question we have not addressed here). As a result, interpersonal understanding is not to be found in a special mindreading tool, such as empathy, or simulation, but in finding shared meaning in common concepts, behaviour, practices, etc. From different paths, we come to the same conclusion: if we do not have some common ground with the other person, simulation or empathy are of little help to understand her. The importance of this common ground should hence be more stressed. As Sandis says: "A more promising approach would be to figure out where the other person is coming from, what are her own interests, presuppositions, and principles of rationality" (Sandis 2019). We take for granted that other people share our concepts and our views of rationality, desirability, etc. and as a result do not realise how little we successfully understand others or conclude from our failure to understand them that they are wrong or make no sense. It is important to realise that in fact, "the two-way act of attempting to understand the other and be understood is an attempt to bring the other into one's life and/or to enter the life of another" (Sandis 2015)

This does not imply that we can understand only mental states that we ourselves hold. This is because, first, what mental states it makes sense for us to hold depends a lot on our situation, and personal situations vary tremendously. We can see how it makes sense for another to believe, desire, feel, or intend something given that person's situation, even if given ours it does not make sense for us to hold the same mental state. For example, I can see why an elderly male might be afraid of developing prostate cancer and might want to have a check-up although I cannot be afraid of that myself since I am a woman. Although I do not have that fear and that desire myself, I can see how prostate cancer is dangerous to elderly males and

how it speaks in favour of getting a check-up. Second, our epistemic position might be such that we know that some of the other person's beliefs were false and, as a result, do not share that person's beliefs. Nevertheless, we can understand why this person holds these beliefs if they seem justified given her epistemic position. For instance, considering that Jack saw smoke coming out of a lab, we can understand why he believed there was a fire and called the firefighters even if we know that there was no fire and do not share that belief.

Thus, to understand another person, we need to have some shared ground with her in terms of evaluative stance (what is desirable, shameful, funny, etc.) and of rationality (when a belief is justified and when it is not) in order to have the same perspective as the other person on the given object of understanding. By contrast, the failure to (completely) understand another person's mental state shows that the other and we have different views on the object of that mental state. For example, our inability to understand Adelaide's belief in creationism in spite of all the scientific evidence speaking against it shows that we have a different way of assessing the reasons that speak in favour of or against believing in creationism. Similarly, our failure at understanding why someone wants (or does not want) children shows that we have very different views on what an enjoyable and valuable life is.

Importantly, in such cases, our failures to understand others can often be explained. We often explain interpersonal differences by pointing to culture, upbringing, drugs, hormones, brain injury, DNA, etc. For example, we can explain the fact that someone is very blunt and says things that are inappropriate, because she has a brain injury in the frontal lobe. What is interesting is that there are different types of explanations that provide us with different types of understanding of others (Sandis 2019). The first type, already mentioned earlier, gives us access to reasons we did not have access to earlier and that enables us to make the other person's perspective intelligible to us. For example, the fact that someone is allergic to peanuts might explain why she is afraid to taste new food before knowing the list of ingredients. This type of explanation dissolves the misunderstanding and enables us to grasp how the different elements of the other person's perspective "hang" with each other and to share that person's perspective.

The second type of explanation does not give us access to motivating reasons we ignored, but to aspects of the other person's situation that play a causal, but not motivational, role in determining that person's perspective. For example, by learning that Adelaide was raised in a community where she was taught from an early age that the scriptures are more reliable than scientific evidence, we come to see why she assesses reasons in a different way than we do. Similarly, the fact that someone has taken drugs explains why she finds everything funny, and the fact that someone has a hormonal imbalance can explain why she is overly aggressive or feels depressed. In those cases, the explanation does not help us to see what is funny about what the person who is high laughs about or how the scriptures are more reliable

than scientific evidence. Rather, it explains to us why that person has a different perspective, i.e. because there is something that makes her see things differently than we do. This type of explanation does not provide us with an understanding “from the inside” (Heal 1998). Rather, it explains why such an understanding is not possible.

Of course, there are also cases where we cannot explain why we find ourselves unable to understand the other person. It might be because we lack crucial information, haven’t tried hard enough to understand the other person, are not good enough at imagining the other person’s situation (see [Understanding and Imagination](#) below) or it might be because we are simply not on the same page and cannot make sense of the other person’s way of looking at the world. If no information is lacking, it is possible that the other person is being irrational. Sometimes, we can find a causal reason for that irrationality – perhaps that person had a brain injury or is under the influence of a drug that prevents her from reasoning correctly. But that is not always possible. Alternatively, the other person might have an alternative, but as legitimate or reasonable, way of assessing the object of understanding. In that case, we are unable to understand each other’s view on that particular matter, but none of us is wrong in our way of doing it. We are simply different. For example, certain people might have aesthetic styles that we cannot comprehend and that cannot be attributed to their social environment or to any other similar cause. It might perhaps also be possible to have different views on what is funny, for example, or even on what is rational.<sup>24</sup>

Some might argue that values such as politeness or shamefulness are obviously socially constructed and thus vary across cultures, but that rationality, desirability, and dangerousness, for example are not. If there is only one possible conception of rationality, then people cannot have different views of assessing reasons and if two people disagree and both have complete knowledge of the situation, then one of them, at least, is irrational. Those who are value realists will also think that what is desirable is objective and that it is not possible to have different alternative views on what appropriate objects of desire are. Others might find it plausible that we find different things desirable. Our metaphysical stance towards those issues will determine what the appropriate response to failures to understand others ([see below](#)) when no information is lacking is. We might conclude that one of us at least is irrational and that her way of assessing the world is wrong, or we might conclude that we simply are different. In any case, if someone is irrational or has a different way of assessing the world than us, we will not be able to understand her.

One worry that we might have if we think there is only one conception of rationality is that studies show that we are far less rational than we think we are (Dawes 2018;

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<sup>24</sup> I have taken for granted that we share the same concepts with the one we are trying to understand. If we do not, we will not be able to understand each other (Sandis 2019). For an analysis of how shared concepts are needed for interpersonal understanding see also Wierzbicka 2012.

McCain 2016)<sup>25</sup>. It seems that we are imperfectly rational so that we make many mistakes that do not fit with our view of rationality and that we would correct if brought to our attention. Since many other people make the same mistakes, they go unseen by others. In that case, we have the impression that we do understand each other, when in fact we do not. That would mean that we understand each other far less than we think. While maybe disappointing, this fact does not undermine the picture of interpersonal understanding given here. Furthermore, the studies that show how irrational we are mainly using abstract cases with numbers or probabilities. Other similar studies conducted with less abstract cases showed much less irrationality (McCain 2016, 213). This suggests that our ability to be rational is sufficient to make most of our daily decisions rationally. Our rational abilities are sufficient to see that if there is a fire, we have a reason to call the firefighters and to come to the belief that the earth revolves around the sun, etc. As Heal says,

So our rationality, if it exists, does not amount to anything very grand. But then we do not need anything very grand to defend the picture sketched above, any more than we need to credit ourselves with illusion-resistant eyesight of eagle-like acuity in order to defend the claim that in vision we have a sense which enables us to become aware of the placement and properties of things about us. (Heal 1998, 96)

This data might show that we are often less rational than we think and mistaken about our ability to understand the world and others, but it does not show that we are unable to understand or that we rarely do. Besides, I am not claiming that we are always rational, that we always desire what we find desirable, and that we are always afraid of what we find dangerous. Rather, what is implied by the present picture is that when we do not, those attitudes are not intelligible to us and to others, at least in motivational terms.

#### *Understanding and simulation*

One question that we need to ask is whether we need to imagine ourselves in the other person's situation or imagine being the other person, to understand her perspective. If we can understand others only when we can see a certain object or situation in the same way that this person does, then it seems to imply that we can understand another only when we can see the world through her eyes and recreate her perspective. Since a perspective is determined by its origin, the point from which one sees, it might seem that it would imply that we can recreate the other person's perspective, and thereby understand it, only by standing in her shoes imaginatively, since we cannot really put ourselves in that person's situation. This theory, called simulationism, might thus seem to follow from what we have said about what understanding is. Broadly speaking, simulationism is the theory according to which we use

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<sup>25</sup> See also Kahneman et al. 1982; Nisbett and Borgida 1975; Plous 1993.

perspective taking and imaginatively put ourselves in someone else's situation in order to identify, predict, or understand that person's mental states (Goldman 2002; Heal 2003; Gordon 1995). For example, Stueber argues that "we understand another person's reason only if we understand them as reasons that we could potentially have in the agent's situation, that is if we could imagine and re-enact his reasons as our reasons" (Stueber 2017, 142). Thus, we come to understand how something is a reason for someone, e.g. how the fact that Laurie is running late is a reason for her to hurry, by imagining being late ourselves and seeing how we would see ourselves as having a reason to hurry.

However, if we look at our experiences of understanding others, simulation, understood as imagining being another or being in that person's situation, does not always seem to be necessary to understand others. In fact, it seems that it is not needed in most daily cases of interpersonal understanding. When Laurie tells us that she needs to hurry because she is late, we understand Laurie's perspective readily, and it does not seem that we need to consciously imagine being Laurie or being late ourselves in order to see how it would motivate us to hurry. It is not the case that Laurie's need to hurry is completely unintelligible to us as long as we have not imagined being the agent who is late. Rather, we can directly see how "being late" speaks in favour of "hurrying" given a desire not to be late. Similarly, we can understand why someone is looking forward to her holiday or is excited to adopt a cat without having to imagine whether we would feel and think the same where we in a similar situation. This does not imply that it is never useful or necessary to imagine being in another's situation to understand her (this will be discussed below in the next subsection [Understanding and Imagination](#) and [section 4.2](#)), but if we look at how we come to understand other people, it does not seem that perspective taking is either always necessary, or the prevalent way we use to understand others.

We might then ask how we manage to recreate another's perspective to understand it if not by imagining standing in that person's shoes. As Heal points out, when we try to understand another, we do not look at that person's brain, we look at the world and at what seems to be the case in that world (Heal 1998). For example, to understand Ali's belief that it has been raining because the pavement is wet, we do not look at Ali, but we consider the fact that the pavement is wet and see if the rain is the only or most probably explanation for that. Similarly, we understand Rafael's desire to be happy by looking at happiness and by seeing that it is desirable.

Sometimes, this looking directly at the world to understand another does not work because that person has false beliefs or the situation we are trying to understand is in the past. For example, to understand why someone who believes the Earth is flat is afraid to go on a boat on the Atlantic, we have to consider what would be the case, if the Earth was flat. Thus, we do not directly look at the world, we look at another world, in which the Earth is flat. In such

cases, we need imagination to consider what is the case in an alternative situation. In that example, we imagine that the Earth is flat, and we see if, given that fact, going on a boat on the Atlantic is dangerous. It follows that to understand others, we often need to imagine the world from their perspective and try to see what is the case in a world such as the other person takes it to be. Understanding others propositionally hence involves simulation in the sense that we simulate some mental states. However, it does not seem to involve the imagining being in someone else's situation or being someone else. Rather, we can see from our own perspective what it makes sense for someone to do, think, etc. in her situation. This account is not simulationist in the traditional sense, although some simulationists such as Heal seem to have very similar views.

In this account, it is the case that we look at those worlds from our perspective and figure out what we think makes sense, is desirable, rational, dangerous, etc. in those worlds. Nevertheless, that is not because the imagining is about us, but because it is necessarily given to us in the first person's perspective. We can only see something as rational, desirable, or dangerous from our first-person perspective. But when we use our imagination to understand others propositionally, we are not trying to imagine what we would do where we in the other person's situation, or what reasons we would have. We are not trying to learn things about us, but about the imagined world. It is different to imagine a world where the Earth is flat and a world in which the Earth is flat and in which we are. The act of imagining is not the same.

Furthermore, we see the going on a boat in a flat-Earth world as being dangerous, or being late as speaking in favour of hurrying, not for us as individuals, but for whoever is in that world or in that situation (and values punctuality). We think about reasons in an impersonal way. When we see that something is a reason, we do not see it as a reason *for ourselves*, but for anyone who is in the given situation. When we see that being late speaks in favour of hurrying, we do not discover something about ourselves, but about the world of reasons, to which we take everyone to be bound to (Millar 2004). Hence, what we discover is that anyone who is late but does not want to be, has a reason to hurry, and that anyone who believes the Earth is flat has a reason not to go on a boat. Stueber's claim that we understand that something is a reason for someone only if we recognise that it would be a reason for us, where we in a similar situation seems to be right, but only because when we recognise that it is a reason, we recognise that it is a reason for anyone, including us. It, however, does not seem that we are able to recognise a reason only when it applies to us.

Thus, the present account implies simulationism not understood as the imagining of ourselves as the other person or in the other person's situation, but rather as the ability of looking at the actual or an imagined world from our own perspective. This version of simulationism is described by Heal as follows:

We can now present the simulation hypothesis like this; ability to think about another's thoughts, e.g. to reason from the existence of those thoughts to conclusions about the existence of further thoughts, is an extension or redeployment of ability to think about the subject matter of the other's thoughts. (Heal 1998, 93)

But since we can only see something as desirable, dangerous, rational, etc., from our first person's perspective, it implies that it is from our point of view that we look at the actual or imagined world and that it is our own views of rationality, dangerousness, desirability, that determine how we see that world. It is because we see going on a boat in a flat-Earth world as dangerous that we take anyone in that world to have a reason to be afraid to do so. If this is what Stueber meant by re-enactment and by saying that understanding another "is possible only by activating our own practical capacities for making such judgements in light of the relevant and salient features of the situation that we and the other agent are aware of", then the present account is also simulationist in Stueber's sense (Stueber 2017, 142).

Maibom reaches a similar conclusion regarding perspective taking (Maibom 2018). She starts by looking at the widespread hypothesis that we use perspective taking to predict or determine what we will or would do in a situation similar to the one of the persons we are trying to understand and then project the result of that simulation onto the other person. However, she notes that there is ample evidence that by doing so, we often fail to predict what we would in fact do in a given situation. We tend to fail to correctly anticipate our reaction to sexual harassment (Woodzicka and LaFrance 2001), the probability of us helping someone in the presence of other people (Hart and Miethel 2008 ; Latané and Darley 1970), the likelihood that we will shock people following an instruction by an experimenter (Milgram 1964; 1974), etc. (Maibom 2018, 113-14). Her explanation is that when we imaginatively put ourselves in someone else's situation, we do not find out how we would react in that situation, but rather how it would make sense for us to react in such a situation. Thus, when we take someone else's perspective, we do not so much run a simulation as we look for what is rational, reasonable, or appropriate to do or think in that situation. As Maibom says, "there is nothing special about taking a first-person stance vis-à-vis what perspective taking yields... The usefulness of imagining that one, oneself, is experiencing what the other is experiencing lies not in the personal element (as in "it's me, not her"), but in what is imagined" (Maibom 2018, 120). I would go even further and say that this is why perspective taking is most of the time not necessary to understand others.

Thus, understanding another consists in seeing things from that person's perspective only in the sense that the world we imagine is constrained by the other person's perspective so that the perspective we take on that world ends up being the same as the other's (if there is successful understanding). But this does not imply that the perspective of the other person can make sense only from that person's perspective and that we have to imagine standing in

the other person's shoes to understand it. Lastly, when we understand another's perspective from our own standpoint, we attribute the perspective we have on the matter to the other person. We deem that the other person sees the (imagined) world in the same way as we do. This is why this type of understanding can be said "from the inside" (Heal 1998). By contrast, when we understand other types of objects such as a math problem or a subway system, we see how everything is related with each other and how it makes sense, but we do not project that seeing onto the object itself.

This view is compatible with Theory Theory, Simulation Theory, and Direct Perception theory regarding how we attribute mental states to others. As explained earlier, the aim here was to inquire what it means to understand another person's mental state once we know what mental state this person is in and regardless of how we have come to that knowledge. This view, however, implies the rejection of Theory and Direct Perception Theories regarding interpersonal understanding. If a form of weak simulation or re-enactment is necessary to understand others, as I just argued for, it implies that the theory and direct perception theories can provide us with knowledge of other minds, but not understanding. Applying folk-psychology principles and directly perceiving someone's mental state tell us what that person is doing, but we need a weak form of simulation, as described above, to understand that mental state. That would mean that when we attribute a mental state by applying a folk-psychology principle, e.g. that Léa is looking for her glasses on her desk, because a person will look for an object at the last place she saw it, we blindly apply this principle with no understanding of it, until we try to see what it means to ourselves. Similarly, it would imply, following Direct Perception Theory, that we can just "see" that Léa is looking for something, without having any understanding of what this means to her (she needs something, i.e. her glasses; she thought they would be on her desk; she will have to look elsewhere, etc.). This might seem an odd result, implying that we blindly apply folk-psychology principles or directly perceive mental states without an understanding of those mental states themselves. This could be an argument in favour of simulation theory. Alternatively, it would mean that we need to see how understanding and the attribution of mental states according to Theory Theory and Direct Perception Theory are intertwined. Thus, even if the description of interpersonal understanding provided here remains neutral regarding the process used to know what mental state another is in, it opens interesting questions regarding the relation between those two processes.

#### *Understanding and imagination*

In the last section, we saw that we often need to use our imagination to understand others in order to consider what is the case in counterfactual scenarios. It follows that someone whose ability to imagine is greatly limited and is not able to imagine other worlds and possible scenarios will be very restricted in her ability to understand others. It seems that few of us face this problem as most people can imagine counterfactual scenarios rather easily. The

widespread use of fictions is evidence. Most of us do not struggle to see why someone who believes the Earth is flat has a reason not to go on a trip on the ocean. It is possible, nevertheless, that our ability to imagine still limits our understanding of others and that if we were better at imagining, we would be better at understanding others. A lack of imagination could prevent us from understanding others in three possible ways. First, it is possible that a better ability to imagine would reveal to us reasons that the person we are trying to understand has and that would make her mental state intelligible to us. Second, a better ability to imagine other people's situation could help us not to uncover reasons, but to see how the situation should be assessed. By failing to imagine other people's situations accurately, we fail to see what is the case in those situations. Third, a better ability to imagine could help us understand others by enabling us to imagine different conceptions of desirability, rationality, funniness, etc. and to make sense of the people who hold those alternative views. I will argue that only the second possibility seems plausible.

Let us look at the first possibility. Is it possible that imagination can sometimes help us gain interpersonal understanding by uncovering new aspects of a situation that had remained unknown prior to the imagining and that provide the agent in that situation with reasons. First, it seems likely that the limitation of our imagination limits our ability to understand certain complex situation. This seems to be the case especially for situations where it seems that personal experience alone can make us understand what it is to be in a certain situation. For example, if we have never had children, we might find it difficult to understand why a father or mother is yelling at their poor 6-year-old that they have had enough and that she'd better behave from now on, thinking that it is violent towards the child and ineffective. If we are able to imagine more precisely the parent's situation, however, we might come to see how a very energetic and disobeying child might run upon someone's nerve to the point of them losing control. Nevertheless, it is not clear that the imagining helps us understand the parent on the motivation level. We have not uncovered any new reason or desire that speaks in favour of yelling at the child. Rather, it enables us to see how some conditions like exhaustion can cause us to do something we have no conclusive reason to do.

There is a reason why it seems doubtful that a good ability to imagine might help us uncover new reasons. Our imaginings of situations are based on the prior knowledge we have of those situations. It is because we know, or assume, that the child has been acting in an annoying way that we imagine that the parent cannot take it anymore, and not the other way around. The uncovering of a new reason would in fact change the situation drastically. It seems unlikely that in an act of imagining we can find out a new reason, because that reason exists only in a different imagined scenario and we cannot imagine a different situation than the one we are imagining. For example, if we imagine that P is the case and that P implies Q, we can deduce that in that situation, Q is the case as well. But if we only imagine that P, but not that

P implies Q, how could we come to know that in that situation P implies Q and thus Q is the case? Third, even if it was possible to uncover reasons by imagining situations, there is no reason to think that the uncovered reasons are accessible only through imagination. We could come to know about them in other ways (the other person can give us the information, we can read it in a book, in a medical file, etc.), so that the ability to imagine would play no further role in our ability to understand other people than the one described above. Thus, it does not seem that our ability to understand others depends on our ability to imagine situations well enough to be able to uncover reasons in that situation.

Now, let us turn towards the second possibility, namely, the one that even when we know all the reasons that an agent has, the limitation of our imagination can prevent us from understanding what this situation implies for the agent. For example, say that we cannot understand Lola's desire to wake up at six to go running. We know about her reasons for doing so: it makes her feel energised for the rest of the day and it keeps her fit and healthy. Furthermore, it is not costly for her because she wakes up spontaneously at six and loves running. Yet some of us might think that Lola is crazy to go running at 6 in the morning. In that case, Lola's action does not seem irrational, since we can see how she has conclusive reasons to do that. Nevertheless, there is something that does not quite fit and that prevents us from seeing "going for a run at 6 a.m." as a desirable thing (for anyone in Lola's situation). It seems that in this case, what prevents some of us from understanding Janet is our inability to imagine that Lola really wakes up spontaneously at six, fully rested, and that for her, running is not uncomfortable or painful. Some of us might find it difficult to abstract from our own situation and to imagine Lola's situation accurately. As a result, they do not take Lola's claim that she likes running and that she wakes up at 6 anyway seriously. It seems, thus, that in such a case, our inability to accept that other people can have very different experience than us and to imagine such situations accurately prevents us from understanding someone.<sup>26</sup>

The third way in which the limitation of our imagination could limit our ability to understand others is by preventing us to imagine other ways of seeing the world and of conceiving of rationality, desirability, etc. This possibility presupposes that other views of rationality, desirability, etc. are possible and that other conceptions of rationality, for example, are not necessarily unintelligible to us and that we fail to understand them only because we fail to imagine them. If our imagination was not so limited, we could perhaps come to see what

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<sup>26</sup> One might wonder if all failures to understand others could in fact due to such an inability to imagine their situations well enough. That would imply that people are never irrational and that they never have different conceptions of desirability, rationality, funniness, etc. It would mean that if we could imagine a serial killer or a paedophile's situation well enough, we could then easily understand why they perpetrated some crimes. This hypothesis seems possible, but unlikely, as it seems quite possible to be irrational, or at least to act for no reasons. It is thus unlikely that a perfect ability to imagine other people's situation would enable us to always understand others perfectly (given all the relevant information at hand).

another society sees as desirable in pain in and for itself or why it is rational for someone to intend an action that prevents her from satisfying a desire.

This question is connected to the problem of imaginative resistance (see for example Kind 2016b; Gendler 2000; Gendler and Hawthorne 2002; Stueber 2011; Weatherston 2004). The problem is the following: we can easily imagine worlds that have very different structures from our own and in which clouds are ill intended and want to punish us by hiding the sun from us or in which stuffed animals are living and conscious beings. Nevertheless, we struggle to imagine a world in which it is good to torture babies or in which a five-lingered maple tree is oval (Yablo 2002). The problem is then, why do we resist or fail to imagine such scenarios?

Whether this problem is related to our present question depends on our acceptance of desire-like imaginings (Kind 2016a; Currie 2002) and in a more general distinction between imagining that and imagining X-ing (Kendall Lewis Walton 2006; Kind 2016a). Some think there is a difference between imagining that something is the case, e.g. that the Earth is flat, that we desire a saucer of mud, that we find the Alps disgusting, and imagining holding a certain attitude towards an object, e.g. desiring a saucer of mud, feeling depressed, or being disgusted at the sight of the Alps. If there are such imaginings, then when we imagine desiring a cold drink on a hot day, we imagine finding the cold drink desirable. We imaginatively see it as desirable in that situation. We then understand why Marianne desires a cold drink on a hot day. The same would go for emotions (we imaginatively see going on stage as stressful), and for rationality (we imaginatively see the fact that it is raining as speaking in favour of taking an umbrella). Imagination could thus help us understand others propositionally.

Many deny that there are such different types of imaginings (Miyazono and Liao 2016) and argue that there is only belief-like, or cognitive, imagining. If those authors are right, then it seems that imagination cannot help us understand others because it cannot help us see what is desirable, rational, and fearful, in a situation that we imagine. The imagining that it is the case that we find a saucer of mud desirable does not put us in the position of seeing the saucer of mud as desirable. However, to successfully imagine other worlds and to engage with fiction, it seems that we must at least be able to see what speaks in favour or what. Otherwise, how could we understand why Ulysses plugs his ears so as not to hear the sirens?

Even if there is such desire-like imagination, it does not imply that we can imaginatively see as desirable, stressful, or rational, something that we non-imaginatively do not see as such. It is possible that our imaginings are constrained by our own view of rationality, desirability, dangerousness, etc., and that we can apply our views to imagined worlds, but not imagine new views. We thus have to give an answer to the problem of imaginative resistance and see if it can be explained by the limitations of our imaginations.

There are two main answers to the problem of imaginative resistance. Some say that we have trouble imagining desiring a saucer of mud or finding torturing babies a good thing

because we do not want to engage in such imaginings (Gendler 2000; 2006). We are convinced to such an extent that torturing babies is a bad thing, and an extremely bad one, that we do not want to imagine that we find it morally good.<sup>27</sup> If this is the right answer to the imaginative resistance problem, then, it is not our ability to imagine that limits our ability to understand other views than ours, but our willingness to do so.

The other main answer is that at least sometimes we are not able to do the imagining we are invited to do (Walton 2006; Yablo 2002). Some say that we cannot imagine what is not possible or contradictory. According to Walton, our inability to imagine certain worlds “has something to do with an inability to imagine [certain kinds of dependence relations] being different from how we think they are, perhaps an inability to understand fully what it would be like for them to be different” (Walton and Tanner 1994). According to Yablo our ability to imagine that a five-lingered maple leaf is oval, for example, is due to the fact that certain concepts like “oval” have their extension determined by how they strike us (Yablo 2002, 485). Hence, whether a maple leaf is oval or no is not something for the author to settle. We determine whether it is oval or not depending on how the shape of a maple leaf seems to us. Weatherson makes a good case of showing how many of those proposals cannot account for all cases of imaginative resistance and why he thinks we should call for several explanations (Weatherson 2004). Regardless, if it is the case that we face imaginative resistance because we cannot imagine certain worlds or situations, then it is not the limitations of our imagination that prevent us from understanding people who had different views than ours.

The possibility that imaginative resistance is due to the limitations of our imagination is usually not considered as a viable option. This suggests that while we think that we can develop our imagination, we do not think that the ability to imagine desiring a saucer of mud or believing in creationism because it is raining depends on our imaginative competency. Furthermore, if the limitations of our imagination were responsible for such cases of imaginative resistance, it would imply that our imagination is unconstrained by our view of rationality, desirability, etc. This is hard to fathom, at least for rationality. When we imagine different worlds, such as a world in which saucers of mud are coveted, we are able to see what makes sense for an agent to desire and to do in such a world because we bring our rational abilities into that world – even if we are not able to see the saucer of mud as desirable. In such worlds, agents believe what they think is true and intend to do things that enable them to reach their goals, etc. It seems unlikely that we can imagine a world where such rational constraints do not apply. Thus, although possible, it seems unlikely that it is the limitations of our

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<sup>27</sup> Walton gives a number of reasons why we might not want to engage in some imagining (Kendall Lewis Walton 2006).

imagination that prevent us from understanding people who hold different views of rationality, desirability, etc. from us.

Thus, our ability to imagine restricts our ability to understand others in the second way explored here. Sometimes our inability to imagine precisely a situation or an experience different from our own prevents us from seeing what is the case in that situation. It seems, however, rather unlikely that the limitations of our imagination restrict our ability to understand others in the other two ways explored here, that is, by preventing us from uncovering new reasons and by preventing us from successfully imagining other conceptions of rationality, desirability, etc.

### **5.2.2 Propositional Understanding, Feeling alike, and Closeness**

In this section, I would like to explore how it feels to understand or misunderstand someone propositionally in light of the above description of propositional understanding. I will explain that failures to understand others make us feel estranged from them and often lead us to judge and reject them. When we understand others, however, we experience that we share something with them. When what is shared is significant to us, we come to see others as “like us”, leading to a feeling of closeness and community. Interpersonal understanding is thus an important factor of social cohesion.

As explained earlier, we can propositionally understand another person to the extent that we agree on what rational, desirable, funny, etc. is regarding the object of understanding. When we fail to understand another person, we see that we have different views on the matter or that the other person is irrational or at least mistaken, unless we lack important information. For example, we might not understand Gauguin’s decision to leave his family to go on an island far away to paint. While he must have thought that following his passion and being a full-time painter was more important than staying with his family and providing for them, we might see the latter as more important than the former. From our perspective, then, the rational thing to do for Gauguin was to stay with his family because that is what he had most reasons to do. His decision to leave thus seems to us somewhat irrational. It is very tempting to blame Gauguin for not responding “correctly” to reasons and for doing something he should not have (rationally or morally).

Typically, we tend to judge and reject others when we cannot understand them. Because we take our way of assessing a situation to be the one that makes sense and thus to be the right one, if someone assesses the situation differently, then we conclude that this person does not make sense and that there is something wrong with her.<sup>28</sup> Davidson even says that “to the

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<sup>28</sup> Failures to understand others could play a role in racism, homophobia and other types of social discriminations. Because some people are unable to understand how one can be sexually attracted by

extent that we fail to discover a coherent and plausible pattern in the attitudes and actions of others we simply forgo the chance of treating them as persons” (Davidson quoted in Millar 2004, 4). At the very least, the one who is not understood is experienced as different. Even if we are able to see that the fact that someone is different does not imply that there is something wrong with her, the experience that we cannot understand her brings forward that difference and we end up feeling estranged from the other person. We see that we are different from the other in what seems to be an irreconcilable way.

However, not all cases of misunderstanding go down this road. Some interpersonal differences are easily accepted or tolerated because they are considered normal in a given society. We know that we are to a certain extent all different, especially regarding taste for food, music, clothing, hobbies, interest, etc. Differences in those areas are usually accepted as long as they are not too eccentric. We usually have no difficulty to accept that someone might hate broccoli while we love it, and although we cannot understand how one can find broccoli disgusting, we do not think there is anything wrong with the one who does. Try to tell people that you do not like chocolate, however, and see if that is so easily accepted...

Causal explanations also help us accept interpersonal difference. For example, we might not understand why Japanese people find blowing one’s nose in public offensive, but we attribute this difference to cultural difference and do not blame Japanese nationals for finding it offensive. Similarly, the fact that Adelaide was raised in an isolated religious community explains why she believes in creationism despite the scientific evidence against it. In such a case, we see how her ability to “correctly” ponder reasons has been skewed by her education, for which she is not responsible. We will not blame her nor think there is something wrong with her. Interestingly, such explanations are not always sufficient to put the person we do not understand off the hook, so to say. For example, many people find that cultural difference is not a sufficient explanation for the practice of excision and that those who practise it are irrational or immoral and should be condemned.

Lastly, tolerance also plays an important role in determining whether we will judge and reject someone for being different from us. Those who accept that we are all different, even if it implies that we cannot fully understand others, will not ostracise others for being different.

When we propositionally understand others, however, we see that we are on the same page: we share the perspective of the other because we share our assessment of what is rational, desirable, funny, etc., in that situation. When we understand someone, we share something with her. It might be a taste for quilting, an interest in Polish history or the rational ability to see that there being a fire is a reason to call the firefighters. Importantly, the

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someone from the same sex, they condemn those desires which they see as abnormal and devious. Social Identity Theory seems to support this hypothesis (see Ellemers and Haslam 2011).

recognition that we share something with another or are alike in a certain respect plays an important role in eliciting a sense that we belong to the same group as well as a feeling of closeness (Ellemers and Haslam 2011; Turner et al. 2011; Morry 2005).

However, many instances of propositional understanding do not make us feel that we share something with the other person and that we are alike. For example, if someone walking in front of us holds the door for us, we understand why that person did that. We agree with her that having someone walking straight behind oneself is a reason to hold the door for that person (if one wants to be polite or kind). The other and we share something. We both see kindness or politeness desirable and, given this, find the action of holding the door rational. It is unlikely, though, that we will have the feeling that the other and we are alike and that we will feel close or connected to her. Because many, if not most, people respect basic rules of politeness, that stranger's politeness seems hardly a shared characteristic. It rather seems to be a default one. The same is true with a shared view of rationality. Another person's beliefs that the earth is a sphere or that being late is a reason to hurry seem very normal. It might even seem to us that anyone should hold those beliefs<sup>29</sup>. Although it does imply that we share something, if everybody else shares it as well, this sharing is not significant and will not give us the impression that we are alike the other person. Hence, although each experience of propositional understanding is an experience of sharing a view on something, it does not necessarily make us feel close, connected and similar to the person we understand.

In order to feel close and alike another as a result of understanding them, we need to see what we share as significant (Ellemers and Haslam 2011 ; Morry 2005). We are more likely to feel close to the one we understand if what we share is important to us and if it is a characteristic that is part of our identity. This is a central claim of the self-categorisation theory in social psychology, which intends to explain how we come to consider a collection of people (ourselves included) as a group (Turner et al. 2011). This suggests that the more what we share defines our identity and the more the recognition of that sharing will make us see the other and us as a group and as closely related. Marcel seems to touch upon that when he gives an example where someone tells us she really likes a particular sort of coffee (Marcel 1997, 134). As it happens, we do too, and thus we understand why that person likes that coffee. Now, unless there are particular reasons that make the coffee we drink an essential part of who we are, our understanding of that person's taste for this particular coffee will not make us feel that we are alike and that we both belong to a community of lovers of this particular coffee. By contrast, our understanding of someone's passion for fly-fishing or Star Wars will quite likely

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<sup>29</sup> Millar insists that our ability to understand another person is not the sign that we are alike in any significant way, but simply the result of us both being rational subjects which is "an implication of having propositional attitudes and of possessing concepts" (Millar 2004, 229). However, as explained above, I believe that interpersonal understanding requires more than a shared view of rationality.

bring up those experiences if we are yourself passionate about it and if it is an important part of our life and of whom we are.

Even if we see that we share something significant with another through understanding, we might not experience closeness if our understanding is only partial and we see that there is something else, also significant, that we do not share. For example, say that Dan is a father whose 13-year-old daughter was abducted and sexually assaulted. Eager to avenge the wrong done to her, he tracked down the perpetrator and tortured him. When Silvio hears about this story, he might completely understand Dan's drive to avenge his daughter. However, he might not understand Dan's decision to act on that drive because Silvio sees many reasons against it, among them, the fact that it is wrong to torture someone, whomever they might be and the fact that he would risk going to jail and his family need him. As a result, although Silvio deeply understands Dan's thirst for revenge, he does not feel close to him, but rather feel estranged from him and blames him for acting on his drives.

Another factor that seems determinant is the number of people who share a characteristic with us in a given context. For example, if the particular coffee we like is a type of coffee most people dislike, then, even if our taste for this type of coffee does not seem to play an important role in defining who we are, we might have a sense that the other person and us are alike and form a community (not necessarily a very enduring one, though). Since most other people around us dislike this type of coffee, our shared taste puts us together against all others on that respect. We might then have a sense that we are alike and bond over that. This also happens when our understanding of another shows that we both share a marginal view on arts, or on something else. If everybody held that view, it would be barely a common characteristic, but in that context, it brings us together against all others. The idea that whether we have the feeling that we belong to a group depends on how alike to us are some people compared to others is the notion of comparative fit in social psychology (Ellemers and Haslam 2011; Turner et al. 2011). What we share with others that can be the basis for the feeling of similarity and community can be many things, not only reasons, preferences, and experiences, but also vulnerability, imperfections, etc.

Of course, there are other ways to become aware of our likeness that do not require interpersonal understanding, such as seeing a tag on a chest or a dressing style. Furthermore, sharing something significant with another is not a necessary nor sufficient condition for bonding with others and having a sense of community with them. Other aspects such as friendliness, character and interdependence, will greatly matter as well (Morry 2005 ; Ellemers and Haslam 2011). If the person who shares our passion for fly-fishing is extremely annoying, we will probably not feel close to her or similar to her. Also, because we understand others completely to the extent that we share their views on the matter, we assume that people who

share our views on important matter will be able to understand us in general and that it will be easier to communicate and to develop a relationship with them (Morry 2005).

We can thus now make sense of Marcel's claim that being available to others, and especially reciprocal availability, makes us feel close to others, that we are together and belong together. As described in [chapter 4](#), being available puts us in a good position to propositionally understand others, which requires something shared with the other. When what is shared is important or meaningful, then we feel significantly alike the other and this makes us feel close to her and as if we belonged to the same group or community. Hence, once again, it is through its connection with understanding that we can understand the effects of availability and its impact on the way we see and experience others.

What we have said in this section also explains why it is so important to us to be understood by others. When others do not understand us, it implies that they likely think that there is something wrong with our perspective, that we are not justified to believe something or act in a certain way, that there is something wrong with what we desire, etc. As a result, we might feel judged or rejected. When others understand us, however, their understanding shows that it makes sense to hold our perspective and that we are justified in doing so. The other person's understanding is a kind of assent to our way of seeing the world and we feel validated, accepted. Furthermore, what we have said above goes both ways. The other person's understanding shows that she shares something with us, which, when significant, makes us feel close to the other and gives us a sense of community. It is thus not surprising that understanding others and being understood by them are important to us.

Lastly, this descriptive work suggests that even if propositional understanding is a cognitive enterprise, it yields more than purely epistemic effects. Furthermore, it might explain several social phenomena. For example, it might explain why we do not want to try to understand people we are mad at, because if we succeed in understanding them, we might not be angry anymore and that is not something that we want. Similarly, it explains why we might be reluctant to understand people that we consider very evil, such as Hitler. We do not want ourselves risking seeing their actions as making sense nor feel close to them because this would reflect poorly on us. The fact that lack of understanding often leads to blame and rejection might, in opposition, partly explain some discrimination such as racism and homophobia.

## 5.3 Experiential Understanding and Its Effects

### 5.3.1 What Is Experiential Understanding?

In [chapter 2](#), I explained experiential understanding as follows: when we feel what another is experiencing through empathy (automatic empathy or perspective taking), we get a sense or an “understanding” of that person’s experience. It enables us to know or have a rough idea of what another person is experiencing on the phenomenological level. With propositional understanding, we come to understand the propositional attitudes of another and the way they are connected. Even if we know that some of those attitudes have a certain phenomenology and imply feelings, those are not themselves given to us in propositional understanding. We know about them, but we do not feel them, and in that sense, we can say that we think about them in an abstract way.

Experiential understanding does not refer here to a form of propositional understanding that would be acquired through experience. For example, it is possible that we can understand what fear is only by having experienced it. But once we know what fear is, we can understand another person’s fear without feeling that fear ourselves. That understanding is rendered possible by experience, but it is not experiential in the sense intended here. It is experiential only if we come to feel or imagine that fear ourselves and take that fear to be similar to the one the other person is feeling.

It seems that like propositional understanding, experiential understanding admits of degrees. We can understand to a certain extent what it feels like to be an immigrant who had to leave her country to survive and who had to overcome multiple challenges to arrive at a country where her situation is, in the end, quite mediocre. We can imagine some of the feelings and sensations elicited by this situation (sadness, longing for the family, loneliness, disappointment, ...), but we might miss others, fail to evaluate the strength of some correctly, etc., so that the experience we will have been able to reconstruct will quite likely fall short from the complexity of reality. We might be able to experientially understand other experiences more accurately, especially less complex ones, such as the pleasure to have a cold drink on a very hot day.

It seems more difficult to assess the accuracy of our experiential understanding than it is of our propositional one. While we can ask someone about her reasons for acting or communicate to that person what we have understood in order to check whether our propositional understanding is accurate, we cannot do the same with experiential understanding, or at least not to the same extent. We can describe our experiences with many adjectives. We can say that what we are feeling is painful, pleasurable, sweet, sour, sad, etc., and that can be used to see if our experiential understanding is correct. But we often find

ourselves quite limited in our descriptions of “what it feels like” and ultimately, we are confronted with the inability to compare one’s person sensation with another’s. We might both taste something sweet, but our experiences might still be quite different. It is thus difficult to know if our experiential understanding is (completely) accurate or not.

*How can we experientially understand another?*

In the [previous chapter](#), we saw that experiential understanding is an outcome of perspective taking and affective empathy. Let us delve into it a little deeper. Often, we come to feel affective empathy and gain experiential understanding by imagining what it feels like to be in someone else’s situation. This could be interpreted in two ways. This can mean that we imagine being in a certain situation and see how we would feel as a result or it can mean that we imagine feeling something as a result of being in a certain situation. For example, let us say that Carmen is anxiously waiting for the results of an exam she took and that is very important for her career. We can see that this is a worrisome situation for her. To gain an experiential understanding of what she is going through, we could imagine being in Carmen’s situation and find ourselves feeling worried, or we could imagine that we are worried because we are awaiting results, like Carmen. Because we often find ourselves having genuine emotional reactions to the imagined situation, we might think that the first option is the one we use. But when someone is in pain because she had an accident, for example, we do not imagine having an accident and then see if we feel pain, but rather imagine the pain of having been injured. Hence, it seems likely that we use both ways to imaginatively experience what another person is experiencing.

Perspective taking is not the only way to gain experiential understanding of another. It seems that sometimes, we “automatically” feel affective empathy, in the sense that we experience the other person’s feeling without having tried to imagine the feeling or the situation (Preston and Waal 2002; Lamm, Batson, and Decety 2007). However, there is still something imaginative about those instances of automatic affective empathy, since the feelings are represented as being a reaction to a would-be situation that we imagine. For example, we might start feeling Carmen’s worry just by looking at her or by listening to her. Once we have that feeling, however, we interpret it as being directed to the imagined situation of awaiting of important examination results. We can also remember what it feels to be in a situation. Of course, memory can be used to understand what another person is feeling only if we have been in that person’s situation. Note that we can remember being in a situation without reactivating what it feels like to be in that situation. Remembering will give us an experiential understanding of what another person is experiencing only if we also try to remember what it felt like to be in that situation.

Imagination thus plays an important role in experiential understanding. More precisely, perspective taking, that is, the imagining that we are in another person’s situation, is one of the main ways, if not the main way, to gain experiential understanding of another person.

Phenomenological experiences are first personal not only in the sense that they are given to us first personally, but also in the sense that we experience the phenomenology associated with physical sensations and emotions only when we are the subjects of these experiences. When we are sad or in pain, we have experiences that we do not have when someone else is sad or in pain. Unlike for propositional understanding, we need to be in the agent's position to have such experiences. Perspective taking enables us to do that and to imaginatively put ourselves, as agents, in other situations than our own.

If imagining being in someone's situation is a privileged way to gain experiential understanding, it implies that we need some prior propositional understanding of the situation. We cannot imagine what it feels like to be in another person's situation if we know nothing about that situation. For example, it is because we have a propositional understanding of Carmen's situation as worrisome that when we imagine what it feels like to be in her situation, we find ourselves worrying and thus have an experiential understanding of Carmen's worry. If we had found Carmen's situation as a reason for her to be angry or happy, we would rather have experienced those emotions. Thus, what we feel when we have an experiential understanding of another greatly depends on our propositional understanding. Furthermore, having a good propositional understanding of the other person helps us to have a more precise experiential understanding of another at least in terms of the intensity of what the other person is experiencing. For example, Carmen's worry will likely be of a different intensity if she is waiting for the results of her highway code or her bar examination. Understanding what Carmen's worry is about is thus useful to understand how intense her worry is.

Some might argue that all we need to know to understand another experientially is what she is feeling and to what intensity, and that knowing the object of the emotion or the situation that elicited the feelings does not enable further or deeper experiential understanding. Some think that "the feeling dimension has no meaningful cognitive content" (Ben-Ze'ev 2001, 50). As a result, what an emotion feels like depends purely on its bodily expression. In order to know what someone feels, it is sufficient to know what that person is feeling in her body (butterflies in the stomach, clenched throat, heat in the face...). In that case, knowing whether Carmen is worried about the results of her highway code or her bar examination does not improve our experiential understanding of her. To have a precise experiential understanding of her, we only need to know what she feels in her body and to what intensity.

Others, like Goldie, think that we have what he calls "feeling towards", that is, feelings that are directed towards some content (Goldie 2000). While we do have some feelings that are purely bodily and that are directed towards nothing, e.g. the pain of a broken toe, emotional experiences usually involve feelings towards. In that case, "Our entire mind and body is engaged in the emotional experience, and all the feelings are 'united in consciousness' in being directed towards its object: united 'body and soul', 'heart and mind'" (Goldie 2000, 55). When

we are worried, we do not, on one side, feel something like butterflies in our stomach and, on the other side, have thoughts about the object of our worry. Rather, they are united and directed together towards that object. Goldie says that “for example, sexual desire is felt with the whole being – body and soul – for the one we desire. And, likewise, our whole being aches in grief for the one we have lost” (Goldie 2000, 55). If our experience of emotions is such, then we cannot have a good experiential understanding of someone’s emotion without having a good propositional understanding of that emotion.

Even if we disagree with Goldie about the existence of the feelings towards, we can accept that having a good propositional understanding of another person is necessary to have a good experiential understanding of that person. Unless we are eliminativists about cognitive phenomenology, we believe that there is something it feels like to have certain thoughts. Then, what it feels like for us to be in a certain situation, is not exhausted by the physical sensations that we have but is also partly constituted by the propositional attitudes that we hold. What it is like for us to be in a certain situation involves having thoughts about ourselves and our situation. As Kriegel says about stream-of-consciousness prose:

Nobody wants to read about an interminable sequence of sensory occurrences. But many of us want to read about stretches of inner life as described by stream-of-consciousness writers. This is because in describing also the thought processes, hopes and desires, and more intellectual aspects of emotion, these narratives manage to shed light on what it is like to occupy a different subjective perspective. Without including such elements, no real insight into what it is like to be someone else would be gained. (Kriegel 2015, 2)

When we reconstruct the other person’s perspective imaginatively through perspective taking and when we imaginatively occupy the agent’s position, we can then have a good idea of what it is for that person to be in her situation. The propositional understanding of others is essential to the experiential understanding of them. While it seems that we do not need to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes to make sense of that person, it seems necessary to do so to know what it feels like for that person to be in her situation. Perspective taking plays thus an important role in our ability to understand others, although it is not the one we often think it is.

If we can have a complete experiential understanding only of those of which we have a complete propositional understanding, then it follows that we can experientially understand another completely only if she shares our view and our experience of what is rational, desirable, pleasurable, funny, etc. While we can have a propositional understanding of another, e.g. of Carmen’s worry about her exam results, without having an experiential understanding of it, that is, without feeling that worry, our ability to experientially understand others depends on a prior or concurrent propositional understanding. However, we can have a partial experiential understanding of people who are very different from us but who share

with us a type of experience or a need. We might not understand why the person who suffers from OCD is distressed at the idea of having to walk on the pavement cracks, but we can still experientially understand that distress. In the same way, we can experientially understand other people's pain, thirst, hunger, need for space or security, even if, we cannot make sense of those people's experiences propositionally.

Another question that we need to address is whether we can have an experiential understanding of an experience if we have never had that experience ourselves. It is doubtful that we can have a complete experiential understanding of what it feels like for Jane to eat a jackfruit, to have a mystical experience or an orgasm, if we have never had those experiences ourselves. If we are unable to experientially understand an experience that we have never had ourselves, then our ability to understand others experientially is quite reduced. My aim here is not to solve this long-standing problem in philosophy of mind, but to see if we can have an idea of the extension of our power to experientially understand others. The question is whether, and if yes, to what extent, we can imagine having experiences that we have never had accurately – and not whether it is possible to imagine such experiences at all, although incorrectly (Kind 2019). The beliefs that it is not possible for Mary to imagine correctly what it is like to see red when she has never seen colour and that it is not possible for us to know what it is like to be a bat are widespread. If “our own experience provides the basic material for our imagination” then what we can imagine depends on what we have experienced (Nagel 1974, 439).

As a result, we might be unable to understand someone's experience either because that experience is of a type that is unknown to us, or because our mind or our being is sufficiently different to the one we are trying to understand for our experience of the same object to be different (Nagel 1974; Paul 2014). As Nagel says, “in so far as I can imagine [the bat's experience] (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for me to behave as a bat behaves” (Nagel 1974, 439). The difficulty is then to determine what types of experience and which beings are sufficiently close to us, for us to have the same experience. For example, we might think that we can understand Carmen's worry as she is waiting for her bar results, because we have had the experience of worrying as we were waiting for other types of results. However, the experience of having tasted an orange does not seem to give us much of an advantage to understand the experience of eating watermelon. Similarly, we might not be able to understand any experience of a bat, but can we understand the experience of an Aboriginal living in the Amazonian forest? Can a young woman understand the experience of an elderly male? Laurie Paul, for example, argues that it is not possible for a wealthy occidental man to understand a poor Ethiopian woman. She also argues that it is not possible for someone who has never had children to understand that experience because it is profoundly transformative (Paul 2014). It is nevertheless very difficult to draw the line between the transformative experiences and the others (Kind 2019; Lewis 1990).

We can also wonder if experiences can be decomposed and if experiential understanding admits of degrees. Lewis thinks, for example, that he can imagine what it feels like to drive a steam locomotive because he is already familiar with the experiences of having a “chilled face and scorched legs” (Lewis 1990, 82). Perhaps it is similarly possible to decompose the qualities of an experience. If we are familiar with certain aspects of qualities of an experience, we can then experientially understand those aspects and have a partial understanding. For example, if we have never tasted a jackfruit, we cannot really imagine precisely what it tastes like. However, we can imagine that it tastes sweet, if it is a ripe one, or we can imagine its meat-like texture, if it is a young one. Similarly, we might not know what it is like to have children, but if we have experienced love, responsibility, tiredness, etc., we can have a vague idea of what that is like. I will let parents judge whether parenthood is completely transformative, but this can be applied to many other cases. We might not know what the pain of having one’s wisdom teeth removed feels like, but we know what pain in general is like and we might even be able to narrow it down to a more precise type of pain (stinging, burning, etc.). It seems convincing that the experience of eating a jackfruit or of having children is not as distant from us – if we have never made those experiences – as it is for Mary to see colour for the first time, and it is likely that this has an impact on our ability to correctly imagine such experiences. If that is the case, then, even if we have never had the experience of the person we are trying to understand, we can still have a partial experiential understanding of her.

This suggests that personal experience has, in general, great value for the ability to understand others. It can help us imagine what something feels like more precisely (experiential understanding) (Bunn and Terpstra 2009; Hailpern et al. 2011). By making us aware of the nuances and the subtleties of a situation, personal experience can also help us identify reasons or desires that someone in that situation might have, thus favouring propositional understanding as well. It is not surprising that people having had particular experiences (near-death experience, anorexia, a trip somewhere special, etc.) feel that people who have been through those experiences can understand them better both propositionally and experientially. At the same time, people who have had personal experience of the situation of the other person have perhaps a higher risk to assume that the other person is having the same experienced as they had, which might not be the case. The empirical evidence is, for now, inconclusive on that question (Hodges et al. 2010; Batson et al. 1996).

#### *What is understood in experiential understanding?*

We have discussed what experiential understanding consists in and how it is gained, but we have not asked what is learnt or understood about another person through experiential understanding. To see what experiential understanding adds to propositional understanding, imagine a scenario in which we have a complete propositional understanding of another person. Say that we know all the details of Carmen’s situation and understand perfectly why

she is worried about receiving the results of her exam. Say, then, that we imagine being Carmen, or being in her situation, in order to also feel what she feels. We will then feel her worry very precisely and come to an experiential understanding of her. What is acquired by this experience? It seems that there is no new fact about Carmen and her situation that is discovered. We already knew that she was feeling worried and we already understood what reasons that gave her. For example, we do not need to feel Carmen's worry to understand why her worry is motivating her to breathe slowly or to meditate in. The only thing that is added to our propositional understanding seems to be the qualitative aspect of Carmen's experience and the first-personal view on her situation.

We might think that experiential understanding can bring propositional understanding in cases where we do not already have a complete propositional understanding of another. In most cases, we do not need to feel (the pain, the emotion, etc.) to understand someone. It is possible that only the experience of the extraordinary intensity of a feeling might enable us to understand how that experience is a reason to do something. For example, Elsa might not understand why someone would want to eat human flesh in a situation where there is nothing else to eat for days because she finds it disgusting and perhaps even immoral. We might tell her to imagine that she is in a situation where she is experiencing extreme hunger, fear of dying, and where the only available food is the human flesh of her dead travelling mates. It is possible that by imagining very precisely this situation, she comes to see that she would eat human flesh after all.

However, even if this example is plausible (and I am not completely convinced they are), it is not clear that what propositional understanding is gained. Elsa already understood that having to choose between eating human flesh and dying gives one a reason to eat human flesh. Nevertheless, she thought that the facts that eating human flesh is disgusting and that it is immoral were stronger reasons not to do it. When she does the imagining and comes to have an experiential understanding of the situation, she does not learn any new reason speaking in favour of eating human flesh. What she discovered is that surviving and satiating her hunger are more important for her than being moral and eating non-disgusting food. As a result, it now seems to her, after all, that she has more reasons to eat human flesh than not to. She thus gains a propositional understanding of the situation by discovering a new way of prioritising values.

Alternatively, we could interpret this case by saying that what Elsa discovers is that in this case, she would be blindly led by her hunger and her survival instinct and would completely disregard reasons. If the latter interpretation is the correct one, then Elsa did not discover any new reason we can have to eat human flesh. Rather, she discovered how being extremely hungry and wanting to survive can make us ready to fulfil our needs at any costs. She thus discovers how being extremely hungry can drive our behaviour in an irrational way. She has

gained understanding of that situation because now she understands why someone would eat human flesh in such a situation, but that does not provide her with a better propositional understanding of that person. It does not help her see what is desirable or rational about eating human flesh. Rather, she understands how hunger and survival instinct can make us irrational. She has gained a causal understanding of such a person, but that person's behaviour is not seen as rational, even if it is natural.

The first interpretation seems to have a better shot at showing how experiential understanding provides us with propositional understanding. The imagining enables Elsa to test her values and to see if for her, moral values always trump others. She comes to see that surviving is eventually more important for her than avoiding the immoral action of eating human flesh. She would, however, never kill someone to eat her flesh. She learns something about what she sees as most important and what her reasons for action are. As a result, she comes to understand propositionally the one who eats human flesh to survive and to see her as rational. Elsa thus gains propositional understanding from experiential understanding because she comes to understand how one is justified in such a situation to eat human flesh. One could still object that it is not the experiential understanding that provides Elsa with propositional understanding, but rather the more precise imagining of the situation. It is not the imagined feeling of hunger that makes her change the way she assesses reasons, but the fact that by imagining being in that situation she can better represent herself what it means to be in a situation of extreme hunger where one is going to die if nothing is eaten. The imagining enables her to consider the situation in which one is dying of hunger seriously (see [section 3.1](#) above). In any case, the propositional understanding of this situation is not accessible only through experiential understanding.

Hence, it is not clear that experiential understanding in itself can provide us with anything else than the qualitative aspect of another person's experience or perspective. It is clear, however, that in general, experiential understanding provides us with a different type of understanding than propositional understanding. Usually, there is no propositional content that is discovered or grasped through experiential understanding. There is only phenomenological content that is experienced. Experiential understanding does not help us see how things hang together; it rather makes us see how they feel. Experiential understanding thus does not provide us so much with understanding as with an acquaintance with the qualitative aspect of an object. As we will see below, experiential understanding can nevertheless make a big difference in the way we relate to others and see their perspective.

### 5.3.2 Experiential Understanding and Seeing Another Person as a Subject

Now that we have described more precisely what it is to understand another propositionally and experientially, we are in a better position to see why perspective taking and experiential understanding bring us as close as we can to experiencing the subjectivity of others.

A subject is a consciousness, a centre of experience, the origin of a perspective. It is that which perceives and experiences. We are subjects because we are conscious of experiences. Our experiences are given to us first personally. There is something it feels like for us to have them (a qualitative character) and they are presented as being ours (subjective character) (see Levine 2001; Kriegel 2015). For example,

When I am aware of an occurrent pain, perception, or thought from the first-person perspective, the experience in question is given immediately, non-inferentially and non-criterially as mine. That is, the experience is given (at least tacitly) as an experience I am undergoing or living through. (Zahavi 2004, 78)

Anytime we have a conscious experience of something, we are the subject of this experience and our experience is presented as such. Even if one argues that there is no mine-ness and that first-personal experiences are impersonal, it remains the case that our experiences are given to us in such a way that we attribute them to ourselves, tacitly or explicitly (O’Conaill 2019).

Other people’s experiences are not given to us in that way. When we see someone in pain, we do not have the phenomenology attached to our own experiences of pain. Furthermore, when we have an experience of watching someone in pain, the other person is given to us as the object of our experience, and not as the subject having the experience (Sartre 2011). There is thus a fundamental asymmetry in the way we experience our own states vs. the way we experience others’ (Hyslop 2013; Sollberger 2017). It follows that we are the only subject that we experience in this direct and subjective way. Even if we could be wired to another’s brain so that we would come to have another person’s experiences, the experiences would be presented to us as ours and not as the other’s (Hyslop 2013; Sollberger 2017). Thus, if we are able to know that others are having certain experiences, we have to become aware of them in a different way than the one we become aware of our own experiences. This is the self-other asymmetry. We can experience that others are subjects, but we cannot experience their subjectivity in the way that we experience ours. We could even say that we experience ourselves as subjects, but we do not experience others as such. We can only make the experience *that* others are subjects.

All of this implies that we cannot have a direct first-personal access to the other’s mind as the other’s from the inside. But we can have other types of accesses. For example, we can have an imaginative one (Hyslop 2013). We can imagine that we are someone else, take their

perspective, and have their (imagined) first-personal experiences. Through imagination, we can transfer ourselves in someone else's skin and have their experiences "from the inside", in the first-person perspective. We can imaginatively put ourselves in Angela Merkel's shoes and have first-personal experiences that we attribute to her. When we do such imaginings, we pick up a notional subject that will be the centre of the perspective we will imagine (Velleman 1996). The result is that we can have (imagined) first-personal experiences that we do not see as ours, but as the ones of the notional subject. Thus, imagination enables us to do the impossible: experiencing other people's mental states first personally, while remaining aware that we are not the subject of these experiences. Through imagination, we can experience other people as subjects.

Yet, by taking someone else's perspective, we do not miraculously have a first-personal access to another's subjectivity. Rather, we imagine that we do. We can even take the perspectives of fictional characters and of people who have been long dead. Hence, the imaginative experience of perspective taking does not provide us with an actual experience of the other as a subject, but with an imaginary one.

The difference that imagination makes is not (only) one of accuracy and detail. When we take someone else's perspective, we often fail to take all the aspects of the other's situation and perspective into account, so that the perspective that we recreate is only partially similar to the one of the other person. Sometimes it is even plainly incorrect. For instance, we might think that Laurie is afraid to go on stage, and through perspective taking, come to feel that fear, when in fact, she is excited and thrilled, but not afraid. But there are situations where our imagining can be very accurate, because we know someone very well, because the experience of the other person is very simple, etc. Even in those cases, the experience that we are having does not seem to amount to an experience of another as a subject, because it is an imagined one and not an actual one.

The product of imagination is not related to reality in a way that we deem appropriate to provide us with an actual (perceptual) experience of something, because imagination is the mental activity of representing something "without aiming at things as they actually, presently, and subjectively are" (Liao and Gendler 2019). It seems obvious that experiencing something through perception is quite different from imagining something, even if it is not completely clear if that difference is one of intensity, voluntariness, or causal relationship with the relevant object (Liao and Gendler 2019). Even if the experience we imagine is perfectly accurate and as intense as the one the other is experiencing, it remains something that we have made up ourselves rather than something coming from an external stimulus and/or passively experienced. It is thus not an experience of the other's perspective, but an "as if" experience of her perspective.

However, the imagining we do in perspective taking is different from many other forms of imagining, because it aims at representing what actually is. When we take another person's perspective, we try to imagine what that person is really experiencing. This implies that we take what we experience through our imagination to be what the other person is experiencing for real, or close enough. That means that the experience that we have and that is elicited by perspective taking is the one we take the other to be experiencing. As a result, it seems to us that we are having someone else's experiencing or something close enough. This is especially the case when we come to feel genuine emotions<sup>30</sup> as a result of perspective taking. When we imagine Laurie's fear and come to feel that fear strongly ourselves, we take it to be what Laurie is experiencing herself. It seems to us that we are experiencing her fear.

This happens even when we are aware that our imagining falls short of the truth, either because it is an imagining, or because we know it is inaccurate. For instance, we might imagine Carmen's perspective and be very aware that we do not exactly know how she feels. However, we do know that fear or strong anxiety is part of her experience, and that is something that we can imagine. In that case, we know that what we are experiencing is similar to what Carmen is feeling at least in certain respects. It then seems to us that we are partially undergoing Carmen's experience.

Even if we do not take the outcome of our imagination to be at least partly accurate, the experience of perspective taking makes us aware of the concreteness of the subjectivity of the other person. Before taking Laurie's perspective, we know that she is a subject, that she is having experiences, and perhaps, that she is feeling fear right now. However, it can all remain abstract knowledge, in the sense that we fail to measure what it means to her and to realise that she is feeling that fear right now. Taking her perspective enables us to realise that she is having first-personal real experiences, even if we know that they are not quite the ones that we imagine. This realisation makes Laurie's subjectivity more concrete to us (Marcel 1999; Scheler 2017). As we will see in the following section, this realisation can change the way we relate to another person completely.

To conclude, perspective-taking and experiential understanding do not literally enable us to experience another's perspective and thus another as a subject. However, it comes as close to it as it can be. Through perspective taking, we come to have an experience that we take to be the one of the other person, so that we take that experience to be one of the subjectivity of the other. Hence, even if we do not really experience the subjectivity of the other person, it gives us the impression that we do. It makes us acutely and concretely aware that the other person is an experiencing subject and that she is experiencing her situation from her

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<sup>30</sup> Some think that this is not possible, and that imagination cannot evoke genuine emotions. See for example Liao and Gendler 2019; Kendall L. Walton 1990 to learn more about this debate.

first person's perspective. That is, I believe, how we should understand Marcel's claim that when we are available (and thus take the perspective of the person we are available to), we come to see her as a subject.

It would also be interesting to compare this access to others' minds (indirect but first personal). Because we cannot have access to the minds of others in the way we access ours, many philosophers have argued that we can have only an indirect access and that we can only infer what mental states others are in. Simulation Theory and Theory Theory are theories that intend to explain how we make those inferences. Those theories are often considered to be third personal because the one doing the inference is an observer (Gallagher 2008). Some authors have found this problematic because, according to them, interaction is an important part of social cognition (Zahavi 2011; Gallagher and Varga 2014). They argue that a correct theory of social cognition needs to be second personal in order to account for that. Direct Perception is one of those theories. Often, we know what others are feeling or doing by directly perceiving their mental states. We see the fear in their face and their grabbing the bottle of water in the movement of their hand. According to the proponents of direct perception theory, it has not only the advantage of being second personal, but also direct, thus accounting for the fact that we do not always need to mentalise to know what others are feeling and doing (Gallagher 2008). If what I described here is accurate, the option offered by simulation theory has been partially overlooked. Simulation is not (only) a process that we do on our own in order to discover what mental state another is in and attribute it to that person. It is (also) a process that enables us to have a first-personal sense of the subjectivity of others. It informs us on the phenomenal dimension of the experience of others. As argued in chapter 2 ([section 2.2.2](#)), this experience is important because the phenomenal dimension of our experience is a central aspect of what it means for us to be in our situation. Furthermore, as we will see below, that experiential understanding makes us see others as mattering, making it play an important social role. This experiential understanding cannot be had through processes corresponding to theory theory or direct perception theory. Therefore, even if the proponents of direct perception theory are right and we can directly perceive some of others' mental states, simulation (perspective taking) should not be pushed aside because it has a unique value.

### **5.3.3 Experiential Understanding and Seeing Someone as Mattering**

When we take someone's perspective and have an experiential understanding, we come to feel sympathy for that person if her situation is evaluated as good or bad for her. We can see this from our own personal experience. It is very hard to take someone's perspective, especially the perspective of someone suffering and feel what we take that person to be feeling, and yet remain indifferent to that person. Empirical evidence also supports this claim

(Coke, Batson, and McDavis 1978; Toi and Batson 1982). It has even been shown that perspective-taking can make us feel sympathy for someone we do not like or disapprove of (Batson et al. 1997).

As we come to feel sympathy as a result of perspective taking, we discover, or have the confirmation, that we value that person's wellbeing. We want that person to be well and what happens to her matters to us. When we understand propositionally that Carmen is very anxious as she is waiting for the test results, we see how it makes sense for her to be anxious, because the situation is bad for her, in the sense that her wellbeing is threatened. However, that might leave us indifferent. If we hate Carmen, we might even rejoice thinking she is not so well. But when we take Carmen's perspective and feel her worry, we feel sorry for her and we see that her situation matters to us and that it looks like a bad thing (for her) from our point of view as well.

Scheler argues in essentially the same lines that when we feel fellow-feeling (sympathy), we discover that others are "our equal in worth" (Scheler 2017, 59). It is doubtful that we come to attribute as much worth to the person we feel sympathy for as to ourselves, but it seems that we indeed come to see others as our equals at least in type, i.e. as both having worth. We see through experiential understanding that others are subjects in the same way that we are and through sympathy that others matter in the same way (although perhaps not to the same extent) as we do. To use Marcel's terms, we see that others are not only their own centres of experiences, but also their own centres of import.

As mentioned earlier, we can have a partial experiential understanding even of people we do not understand propositionally as long as we are familiar with part of their experience (pain, joy, relief, etc.). That means that we can come to feel sympathy for anyone who shares a type of negative experience with us, such as pain. It follows that we can potentially come to see almost anyone as a centre of experience and import through perspective taking. Given the impact that sympathy can have on our relationships with others on our motivation to help them (see [chapter 3](#)), the connection between perspective taking and sympathy has important social implications.

It is not clear, however, why there is such a connection, especially as empirical data suggests that perspective taking is not a key antecedent to sympathy. Batson claims that the valuing of the other person, rather than perspective taking, is an antecedent to sympathy (Batson 2011, see also [chapter 3](#)), because first, research shows that people tend in general to feel sympathy for those they perceive as in need without being instructed to take their perspective (Batson et al. 2007). Second, the sympathetic response is more strongly modulated by the valuing, or devaluing of the person in need, showing that the valuing of another is a more reliable antecedent to sympathy than perspective taking (Batson et al. 2007). However, the more we value someone and the more we tend to spontaneously take that

person's perspective, thereby eliciting sympathy (Batson et al. 2007, experiment 2). As a result, Batson thinks that the valuing of another leads to perspective taking, which, as we perceive that the other is in need, leads to sympathy. Because of this chain of causal events, when we are instructed to take the perspective of someone we do not already value, the "valuing path" is activated and leads to sympathy (Batson 2011, 44). Perspective taking is thus an especially useful and effective way to elicit sympathy when there is no prior valuing, even if perspective taking is not an antecedent to sympathy.

It is not clear to me, however, how to make sense of Batson's explanation. If I understand his proposal correctly, his idea is that since perspective taking is usually a spontaneous outcome of the valuing of another, there is a mechanism such that if we have perspective taking, it retro-activates the valuing. It is not clear though why there should be this retroactive effect. This relation between perspective taking and sympathy needs to be investigated further.

As a starter, I have two hypotheses to offer that could explain why taking someone else perspective makes us value that person and feel sympathy for her. One possibility is that by taking another's perspective, we experience that person as a subject and as being similar to us in that respect. When we experience others as similar to us, we tend to consider them to be close to us or part of our community (see above [section 3.2](#)). Furthermore, we care about the members of our community. Thus, when we experience through perspective taking that another is similar to us in her vulnerability to pain, for example, we start caring about that person and valuing her and we then experience empathy for her.

Another possibility is that we care about the subject of our experiences so as to avoid painful experiences. That would mean that I do not care about Elodie because I am she, rather, I care about what happens to her because I feel her experiences. If she is injured, I feel the pain, if she goes on holiday, then I get to enjoy it, etc. I care about what happens to Elodie as a person because I, as a subject, experience it. If my brain was wired to Jack so that I would feel his experiences, I would come to care about what happens to Jack in the same way that I care about what happens to Elodie. When we take other people's perspective, we get to imaginatively become their subjectivity and have their experiences. Then, because we feel their experiences, we start caring about them. Both explanations seem plausible to me, but at this stage, I have no reason to favour one over the other.

In any case, this suggests that perspective taking, or affective empathy, plays a social role. If it makes us care about others and see them as mattering, it can motivate us to help others and help us bond. There has been an important discussion around empathy and its social and moral role (see for example Maibom 2017; Coplan and Goldie 2011; Nussbaum 2003; Maibom 2014). While many researchers have extolled the virtues of empathy, in the last ten years, others have argued that empathy does not play such a role and, even more, can have a negative impact (Prinz 2011; Bloom 2017). Affective empathy can

sometimes lead to personal distress (Singer and Klimecki 2014). In that case, there is no pro-social outcome and, in addition, the person feeling empathy feels distressed. Some have argued that it is rather sympathy (empathic concern) and compassion (see chapter 3, [section 3.3.2 and 3.3.5](#)) that should be aimed for, because they are the attitudes that more reliably lead to helping behaviour and do not cause distress to the ones experiencing them (Batson 2011; Bloom 2017). But the causal relation between perspective taking and sympathy suggests that it can be pro-socially useful after all. If perspective-taking can elicit sympathy in subjects who would otherwise have remained indifferent, then there is certainly a place for empathy at the table of pro-social attitudes.

To conclude, perspective taking really changes the way we see and relate to others. By providing us with an experiential understanding of others, it makes us experience them as subjects and realise that they are really feeling the experiences that we propositionally understand them to have. It also leads us to feel sympathy and to want to relate with them and help them. Of course, if we are available to another, then we already value that person. But valuing someone does not prevent us from sometimes being indifferent to that person, discarding her feeling, or from being mean to that person. But even in such cases, if we manage to be available to that person and to try to understand her by taking her perspective, we will find ourselves to be rather caring and compassionate. Thus, availability can change the way we see and relate to others. Furthermore, as explained in [chapter 4](#), when we do not value someone or cannot bring ourselves to be available to someone although we would want to, then perspective-taking can be of great help. If we can imagine what the other person is experiencing, then the rest will easily come along.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

As a result, when we are available to others and manage to understand them both experientially and propositionally, we come to see them as subjects who matter, with whom we share something and, in some cases, who are significantly similar to us and with whom we form a community. This explains why Marcel said that when we are available to another we see her as a subject and feel close and connected to her. This also explains some of the effects of understanding (and availability) described in [chapter 4](#), such as why feeling understood involves feeling valued, respected, and accepted. It has become clear that there are more benefits to understanding others than a mere epistemic gain that enables us to predict another's behaviour or identify someone's need. Propositional and experiential understandings play an important role in our social relations and help us bond with others, while the failure to understand plays the opposite role. This is why availability can drastically change the way we see and relate to another. This is not to say that availability is the only way to bond with others,

nor that availability has no shortcoming. Being available might not always be the best thing to do. As mentioned in [chapter 2](#), if the other person is drowning, it will probably be better to try to save that person than to be available to her.

## **6. The Practical Applications of Availability: The Case of Medicine**

In [chapter 4](#), we explored the effects of availability on the one who is available, the recipient of availability and their relationship. We found that the main benefits of availability are (1) enhancing the chances of understanding the recipient of availability accurately, and (2) fostering a good relationship between the two by making the available one feel close and connected to the other and making the recipient of availability feel understood and cared for. While those benefits certainly are valuable to our daily life and we would greatly benefit from being available in our interactions with friends, family, colleagues, etc., they are also greatly beneficial to professional environments, especially those where the development of a relationship of trust plays an important role and where an accurate understanding of others is crucial. Availability can be important in teaching, management, and even in sales. Here, I have chosen to explore the relevance of availability for the relationship of care at large and especially the medical one.

In this chapter, I first show that some availability from the carer is necessary for helping the patient efficiently and ethically. I also discuss what degree of availability is appropriate for the medical relationship and how long it should be sustained for. In the second part of the chapter, I discuss what attitudes are currently promoted and whether availability should be promoted instead. I then explain how availability can be promoted and taught, and address the question whether availability can be willed or not. In the last part of the chapter, I provide ideas about further research that could be conducted on availability and that could empirically verify the claims defended in this chapter (and in the rest of this dissertation).

### **6.1 Availability and the Medical Domain**

Availability is presumably beneficial to any caring relationship and thus any profession of the care domain. However, I have decided to focus mainly of physicians and on the doctor-patient relationship to restrict the domain of inquiry and enable a more precise analysis of the role that availability plays in it. Although much of what is said below is also valid for nurses, clinical psychologists, physiotherapists, life coaches, etc., the analysis provided here would need to be adapted to the specificity of each of those fields.

### 6.1.1 The Goal of Medicine

The first logical step in an inquiry into the benefits of availability for medicine would be to identify the goals of medicine and then see how availability is necessary for, or at least instrumental in, reaching those goals. Surprisingly, the question of the goals of medicine is seldom directly addressed in medical textbooks. It seems, perhaps, that the answer is too obvious to deserve an explicit treatment. Clearly, medicine has to do with health, disease, and sickness. The role of medicine is to restore and maintain health and to relieve pain and suffering. Zadeh Sadah gives a similar answer in those words: "Medicine is concerned with the treatment of sick people, the promotion and protection of health, and the prevention of maladies and human suffering" (Sadegh-Zadeh 2015, 109). However, this is not the whole answer, but just the beginning of it. What disease, sickness, illness are, as well as health and suffering is still debated. How we conceive of those concepts has in fact an impact on what goals we take medicine to have. It is not the object of this chapter to enter the detail of each of this notion. But to see how availability promotes the goals of medicine, it will be useful to see how the way we understand those terms is related to an important change of paradigm in medicine.

In his influential book *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine*, Eric Cassell (Cassell 2004) shows how our conception of what a disease is and what a person (and hence a patient) is can drastically change how we conceive of the role of the physician. He explains how the former belief that diseases are concrete entities and structural changes in the body led physicians to be looking foremost for the disease in the patient's body rather than at patients themselves and at their suffering. But this conception of disease was mistaken.

It turns out that the object of the physician's search, the disease entity, does not exist in concrete reality but is merely an abstraction without independent existence. The only thing the clinician can work on (a paradox for medical science) is this sick person. (Cassell 2004, 108)

The object of medicine is thus not the disease in the patient, but the patient who has the disease. Similarly, Cassell distinguishes between pain, which is a bodily sensation, or symptom, and suffering that goes beyond physical pain – and sometimes has nothing to do with it – and that is experienced when "an impending destruction of the person is perceived" (Cassell 2004, 33). As a result, not all pains make patients suffer. If we take the physician's role to be relieving their patients from pain, we will be looking for the physical cause of pain, whereas, if we take it to be the relieving of suffering, we will rather be looking at what pains make the patient suffer, how she sees that suffering and what it takes to relieve the suffering, but perhaps not the pain.

These changes in the conception of the object of medicine and of its goal are symptomatic (pun not intended) of a shift in paradigm in medicine which started to occur around the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is what Marcum calls the “Humane or Humanistic turn” (Marcum 2008). Physicians are not looking at disease or disruption in bodily structures anymore. They are attending to patients as persons. The patients are not conceived anymore as mere bodies, or as an assemblage of bodily parts, but as subjects, persons, selves (Cassell 2004 ; Marcum 2008 ; Sadegh-Zadeh 2015 ; Solomon, Simon, and Kincaid 2016). Because the patient is more than a bodily being, it takes more than taking care of her body to help her and heal her (Marcum 2008). The physician is not a scientist or a technician, but an active relational agent that takes part in the healing process rather than orchestrating it. According to that conception, medicine is more than medical knowledge and science, it is also an art, a very relational one (Cassell 2004). The definition of medicine and of its goal given above thus still holds, but the patient as a person has to be put at the centre. Medicine serves the patient as a person and not as a body, and it is her suffering that the physician aims at relieving, and not just her physical pain.

It is in such a conception of medicine and of its role that availability has a role to play. As we have seen in [chapter 4](#), some of the main effects of availability are that it enhances the chances of understanding the recipient of availability and fosters the development of a good relationship with her. As it happens, a good understanding of the patient and the establishment of a good relationship with her, and especially a relationship of trust, is of utmost importance to the goal of medicine as conceived by the humane practitioners.

### **6.1.2 Availability and the Medical Practice**

#### *Understanding the Patient*

A good understanding of the patient is necessary for helping her, for if the physician does not have a good and accurate understanding of the problem, she cannot identify efficient ways to help. This means that the physician needs to come to a good understanding of the symptoms that the patient has observed, how they arose and when, and for how long, to possibly identify the health problem. The physician cannot fulfil her duty without understanding the patient’s suffering.

However, to help the patient, the physician’s understanding often needs to go beyond the mere understanding of the symptoms and of their history. As Cassell points out, very often, there is not just one problem or disease to identify to solve the patient’s problem. Many other factors play a role and have to be taken into account, such as the patient’s profession, diet, family, hobbies, the atmosphere at work or at home, her past, her emotions, etc. Cassell illustrates this with the case of an elderly patient found lying on the floor of his apartment with

pneumonia (Cassell 2004, 110). While it seems at first sight that the problem is easily identifiable (*streptococcus pneumoniae*) and thus calls for a rather straightforward solution, there is much about this patient that needs to be understood to effectively care for this patient. In fact, that patient lost his wife in the last year before the accident. Since then, he has been living alone in his sixth-floor apartment without lift. Because of knee arthritis, the patient started to go out less and less, leading to isolation and depression, but also malnourishment leading, eventually to him falling sick. With the whole picture in mind, it is clear that giving the patient antibiotics without looking into his malnutrition, depression, and knee arthritis would not help the patient on the long run.

A good understanding of the suffering of the patient, rather than her pain, and the cause of that suffering is also needed. Recall this example from Halper given in the introduction:

Consider this experience told to me by the patient. When this woman was pregnant, she expressed fear of childbirth. Resonating with her anxiety, her obstetrician quickly reassured her that she could be kept from severe pain and that, if necessary, she could be medicated to the point that she would be "out of it". This response terrified her, because her fear was of losing control, either by being groggy from anaesthesia or being "tied down" to an intravenous line. She had, it turns out, been a rape victim who had experienced this kind of helplessness and immobility. (Halpern 2001, 80)

The problem here is not one of medical diagnosis, but of understanding the experience of the patient. What makes the patient suffer is misunderstood by the obstetrician, who, as a result, ends up doing more harm to her patient, despite meaning well. This physician also fails to attend to her patient as a distinct individual. She assumes her patient is like all her other patients, that is, afraid of the pain of labour. But this patient is not a woman in general and has particularities that make her situation completely different.

Furthermore, a good understanding of the patient as a person is necessary not only to make a diagnosis, but also to discern what treatment to offer the patient. A physician needs a good understanding of her patient's life, under what constraint she is, what is important to her and how she sees her disease to find the treatment that suits the patient best. As Cassell says, "What is good for the patient's lungs or kidneys is not necessarily good for the patient" (Cassell 2004, 123). It might be more important for a patient to live a "normal life" than to live longer under poor conditions. Gawande gives the following example (Gawande 2014, 51 sqq.): he attended the first consultation of an elderly woman with a geriatrician. That woman suffered from several conditions including an acute back pain, advancing arthritis, incontinence, and metastatic colon cancer. Gawande thought that the geriatrician would need to focus on the most threatening problem (cancer) or the one that bothered her most (her back pain) for this first consultation. Rather, the geriatrician focused on what could support her quality of life best,

because that is what was most important to her. He prescribed a few changes in her medication and in her diet and a regular visit to a podiatrist, all of them to prevent a fall. This enabled the patient to keep living independently and comfortably at home. What is most important, as well as what is acceptable, depends on each patient. Some find certain conditions unbearable (dependency on aid for bathing for example) while others accept them easily as long as they can still read or see their grandchildren. In addition, finding the treatment that cures the patient's disease is of no use if the patient will not take the treatment, or will not take it appropriately. Consequently, it is important to come to a good understanding of the patient, of her values, and life, to find the treatment that will not only help the patient, but that the patient will also observe.

For all of those reasons, a good understanding of the patient as a person, and not just of her symptoms, is crucial for the physician to be able to help her patient. This implies that the medical interview cannot be guided only by the desire to identify the disease. The physician needs to be open to learn about her patient's experience in life more generally. This model of interview given by Sadegh will often prove unsatisfactory:

1. Physician: How may I help you?
  2. Patient: I have been having sporadic chest pain and also an increasing physical weakness for some time.
  3. Physician: (thinks: "a 49-year-old man complaining of chest pain and weakness. Maybe he has a heart problem? She asks:) Please tell me more about your chest pain.
  4. Patient: Well, it is pressure-like, Doctor.
  5. Physician: (thinks: "Does he suffer perhaps from angina pectoris due to myocardial ischemia?" She asks:) When does your chest pain occur and how long does it last?
  6. Patient: Often it occurs after meals and lasts for hours.
  7. Physician: (thinks: "No heart problem, it seems." To test this hypothesis, she asks:) Does the pain radiate to your left arm?
  8. Patient: No.
- (Sadegh-Zadeh 2015, 277)

If all the physician is doing is asking about the symptoms, thinking about what disease it could be, asking specific questions regarding that disease to verify or contradict that hypothesis, etc. until one or several possible diagnoses have been made, there will be no room for learning about the patient as a person, which can be essential for the reasons given above. This is not to say that clinical thinking and possible diagnoses should not guide the interview. They are, of course, central to the understanding of the problem and perhaps the identification of the disease. But some room needs to be left out to simply get to know the patient and some openness is needed to learn useful information about the patient that would not come out in such an interview.

Because availability greatly enhances the chance of understanding the recipient of availability accurately, it can be a powerful tool to the physician. By being available, the physician is not just trying to come to a diagnosis, but trying to understand the patient, what her problem is and how she experiences it. By opening the interest beyond the disease to the patient herself as a person, availability enables the physician to reach a fuller understanding of the patient, thus enabling a better diagnosis and choice of treatment options.

#### *Developing a relationship of trust*

The importance of the doctor-patient relationship and of the therapeutic alliance is widely recognised and empirically supported (Lings et al. 2003; Crom et al. 2019 ; Tessier et al. 2017). Along with the humane turn, came the emphasis on the humane or empathic attitude of the physician which enables the patient to feel understood, valued and to trust the physician (Huntington and Kuhn 2003; Levinson, Gorawara-Bhat, and Lamb 2000; Riess et al. 2012). The doctor-patient relationship matters beyond the mere satisfaction of patients. The development of a relationship of trust has other important practical benefits.

First, the patient who trusts her physician might confide in her more easily, possibly thereby giving her physician important information regarding her case and thus helping make the diagnosis and the treatment choice (Halpern 2007; Levinson, Gorawara-Bhat, and Lamb 2000; Suchman et al. 1997). Further research needs to be conducted to prove this hypothesis, but existing data suggests that patients who think their physician is interested (in them or in a particular issue), and who have developed a good therapeutic alliance with their physician disclose more information (Farber 2003; Berrios-Rivera et al. 2006). Overall, it helps the physician acquire a better understanding of her patient.

Second, it has been shown that patients that develop a relationship of trust with their physician and especially those that perceive their physician as empathic, caring, and interested in them, have better healing outcomes (Hojat et al. 2011; Steinhausen et al. 2014; Sultan et al. 2011; Canale et al. 2012). This is partly explained by the fact that such patients comply better with the planned treatment. A relationship of trust is thus an essential element of medical care. Cassell even argues that the physician *is* the cure: “The physician is the treatment. Antibiotics, other potent medications, modern technology, or even the ministrations of others in the medical setting (whatever they may be in their own right) are the physician’s tools, but the physician is the treatment” (Cassell 2004, 126).

Availability can greatly help develop this relationship of trust by making the patient feel understood, and cared for, as explained in [chapter 4](#). Thus, availability can be highly beneficial to the medical practice since two of its main effects are essential to an effective and humane medical practice. This is not to say that availability is the only competence that a physician must have. A physician can be very available yet very incompetent. Medical knowledge and experience, medical thinking skills, as well as communication skills are also necessary. All I

am claiming is that availability belongs to the valuable skills and competence that make an efficient physician.

### **6.1.3 Availability and Biomedical Ethics**

Availability is also a precious competence to the physician who is faced with an ethically difficult situation. The four principles of bioethics (respect for autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice) (Beauchamp and Childress 2013) are often taken to provide a framework for ethical decision-making in medicine. They are a great help in guiding deliberations and are widely used in that way. Availability is in fact also central to biomedical ethics. I am going to argue that the four principles of bioethics can only be applied if the physician takes some time to be available to her patient, because the principles of bioethics can only be respected if there is a good understanding of the situation and of the perspective of the patient and if the wellbeing of the patient is the physician's main preoccupation.

First, the four principles of bioethics can only operate on a good understanding of the patient's situation. In order to determine what is nonmaleficent and beneficent for a patient from what would harm her, we need to understand what her problem(s), medical and nonmedical, is (are). As argued above in a more general context, we cannot help someone if we do not know what that person needs. In Halpern's example of the pregnant woman, the obstetrician thinks that reassuring her patient is beneficent and that the ways of alleviating pains she offers would be beneficent or at least nonmaleficent. But unbeknownst to her, she is wrong because she is mistaken about her patient's situation, and this completely changes what is beneficent and nonmaleficent in that case. Of course, we cannot always have a perfect description nor understanding of a patient's situation, but the better the understanding and the more chances there are that a deliberation based on the four principles of bioethics delivers good results.

Similarly, a good understanding of whom the patient is and of her perspective on her situation are necessary to know how best to respect her autonomy. This requires not only knowing what that person wants (receiving a treatment or not), but also what her values are, how she lives and what is central to the person that she is, or was, if her faculty of discernment have been impaired. We cannot respect someone without knowing who that person is (autonomy as authenticity) (Foureur 2016). For example, faced with an elderly person diagnosed with cancer, you can wonder what is more important for her: having a smooth end of life at home among her loved ones with no invasive treatment or living as long as possible to see her first great-grandchild? Is she someone who privileges comfort and quality of life or is she someone for whom independence is everything and who cannot imagine being

bedridden and having strangers (professionals) washing and feeding her? All those elements are crucially important to determine how best to respect a patient's autonomy.

Of course, a good understanding of the patient's situation also matters for the principle of justice. We cannot determine how acting in one way or another would affect others (family, medical team, society) and what is fair or not regarding society without understanding what the situation is and what the different options are.

Thus, the result of a deliberation based on the four principles can only be as good as our understanding of the situation and of the patient. If there is no understanding, the principles are completely inefficient. I argued earlier that availability puts us in a very good position to understand someone and her situation, either by listening to the patient talk about herself or by listening to close ones or reading a document (e.g. advance directives). It follows that availability is instrumental to an adequate ethical deliberation based on the four principles of biomedical ethics.

Second, the four principles aim at the good of the patient. This (and the good of others) is what motivates the use of the four principles in the first place. The principles are designed to help us discern what is good for the wellbeing of the patient, and what is right with the patient, while keeping this on balance with what is good and right for others (through the principle of justice). A physician who does not value her patient and does not desire her wellbeing, as the available one does, will probably not be motivated to use the principles, since she is not aiming at finding out what is best for the patient. The physician who is mainly preoccupied about dealing efficiently with the patient, performing a beautiful surgical act, or manipulating her patient into accepting some treatment will likely not even think about the four principles of bioethics. Even if this physician tries to use the principles for another reason (e.g. because she thinks it is her duty or out of habit), she will not be able to use them efficiently since she is not preoccupied with discerning what is good for her patient, but rather dealing efficiently with the patient or finding a way to make her agree to the treatment plan. Thus, a physician can be motivated to use the principles of bioethics to figure out what is best for the patient only if she values her patient and desires her wellbeing. Availability has the double advantage of providing such a valuing and of also enhancing the chances of understanding the patient correctly.

#### **6.1.4 Is Valuing the Patient Necessary?**

Because of the importance that an accurate understanding of the patient plays in the medical practice, it is clear that it is essential that the physician pays attention to her patient and tries to understand her ([second feature of availability](#)). We might, however, still have doubts that it is also essential to be motivated to do so by a valuing of the patient. We might also worry that

it is asking too much from physicians. Even if a valuing of the patient is beneficial to the medical practice, it might not be possible or sustainable for physicians to value their patients and if this is the case, availability should not be promoted among physicians and medical students. I will argue that the valuing of the patient is in fact important to the medical practice, and that although sometimes difficult, availability is not too demanding to physicians.

I have explained in detail in [chapter 4](#) why being motivated by a valuing of someone is important to reach a good understanding of that person and to develop a good relationship with her. I will not repeat the whole explanation here, but I take it to be valid in the case of the medical practice as well. If the physician is motivated by another purpose than understanding her patient, that further purpose will likely skew her understanding of the patient. Furthermore, being available, rather than merely trying to understand the patient enhances the chances not only of understanding the patient, but also of making her feel understood and cared for, which is necessary for developing a relationship of trust. Studies show that indeed, patients want physicians who are interested in them and care about them (Wensing et al. 1998; Vedsted and Heje 2008; Cheraghi-Sohi et al. 2006; Bensing, Rimondini, and Visser 2013).

Furthermore, the aim of the physician is to help the patient regarding her health (mental or physical), and as we saw in the last section, it is important that the physician really desires her patient's good to have that as her main aim. If the physician does not value her patient and does not desire her wellbeing, her decisions will be guided by another aim (like doing her duty), which might, in some cases conflict with the good of the patient. This happens for example when a physician wants to run tests to find out what the patient is suffering from, although the latter is dying and cannot in any way benefit from those tests, but can rather be harmed, or at least be disturbed by them. If the physician does not desire the wellbeing of her patient, she might not make the effort to find out what constitutes her wellbeing and act on what is usually the case or common practice, and which might be harmful to that particular person.

Lastly, I believe the valuing of the patient can seem too demanding only when it is misconceived. As explained in chapter 2, [section 2.2.1](#), the valuing of the recipient of availability can take many forms. We can value another by admiring, loving, liking, caring, approving of someone. Availability can be instantiated through many different types of valuing. This opens the question of what type of valuing is appropriate to or efficient for the medical practice. It seems that it is not a good idea to advise physicians to love or admire their patients. This would be too demanding and not sustainable for them. Furthermore, not all patients are admirable people. Rather, the valuing at stake in the medical practice needs only to ensure that the physician is interested in her patient for herself and desires her patient's wellbeing. For that, the physician does not need to love or admire her patient, but only to subjectively experience her patient as important and worth of respect and care. Although still challenging, this is much less demanding. It does not imply that physicians must like and appreciate their

patients, but that they see them as people who matter and that they respect them and desire their wellbeing.

In addition, as we saw in [chapter 4](#), it is possible to come to value someone by taking her perspective. If a physician struggles to value her patient, she might try to take that person's perspective so as to come to value her and become available to her. Consequently, the valuing of availability does not need to be too demanding for physicians if it is conceived of appropriately to the context of medical practice.

### **6.1.5 The Ideal Degree of Availability During the Medical Interview**

As discussed in [chapter 2](#), availability can vary not only according to the type of valuing that is instantiated, but also according to the degree to which each of the other feature is fulfilled. We can pay attention to someone to understand her to a different degree, and similarly, the valuing can vary in how big a role it plays in motivating us to try to understand the other person. We shall then ask what the appropriate or optimal degree of availability for the medical encounter is.

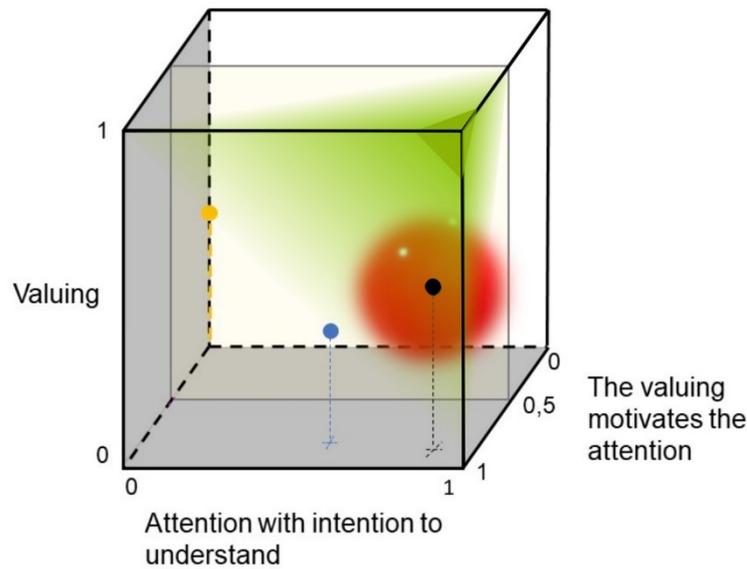
As we have seen, an accurate understanding of the patient, her situation, and her experience is critical for good care. How accurate and extensive the understanding needs to be depends, again, on the situation. Certain situations are quite straightforward, like the one of a young man with flu symptoms. Others are more complex, like the one of a man in his mid-fifties with acute headaches with several comorbidities such as overweight and diabetes. Furthermore, some situations might be more complex than they seem. For example, a broken arm can be the result of an accidental bad fall on an icy street, but it can also be the result of domestic violence. Thus, although some situations might require a lower degree of understanding of the person and her life, all situations require a level of attention high enough to be able to judge how much understanding is needed and to at least make sure that the understanding is right and that the situation is not more complicated than it looks. In general, medical cases thus require a high degree of attention and an important effort to understand the patient.

What is the optimal degree of valuing that a physician should have towards her patient? As we have seen in previous chapter, a valuing of the other leads to feeling sympathy for that person when her situation calls for it. That means that the more a physician values her patient, the more she will be emotionally affected by what happens to her patient. Beyond the question of medical objectivity that often comes back and that will be discussed in [section 3](#) below, it is simply not sustainable for a physician to feel strong emotions for each of her patients. Furthermore, it might even seem inappropriate or unprofessional for patients to see their physician care deeply about them in the way a friend or spouse would. Hence, her valuing

should not be too high. In fact, the valuing needs only to be high enough to motivate the physician to pay attention and try to understand her patient and, after, to be motivated to help her, within the boundaries of duty. For example, the physician does not need to be motivated to lend money to her patient, even if that is, in fact, what she needs most. To evaluate her degree of valuing and its appropriateness, a physician can look at what she is motivated to do for her patient and what she is inclined to feel for her. If she finds herself completely uninterested in her patient or having no desire to help her, she might need more valuing. By contrast, if the physician finds herself extremely distressed by what happens to the patient or willing to do things for her that she would not do for most other patients, she might value her too much.

Regarding the third condition for availability, that is, the fact that it is the valuing for the patient that motivates the paying attention and trying to understand the patient, we have already established that it should be at least the main motivation (chapter 2, [section 2.2.3](#)), to avoid that other competing motivations guide the physician's attention actions.

A physician's availability should thus have a high degree of attention, but a rather low or medium valuing (see red area in Figure 6 below). But most importantly, a physician's availability should have some "fleetingness". By that, I mean that the degree of availability of a physician should not be constant during the interview. There are times when the overall degree of availability should be high and others when it should be low according to the needs of the moment. If a physician was available all the time, she would be trying to understand her patient at every moment and would not be able to think about possible diagnoses and treatments. Availability alone is not sufficient for physicians to be able to help their patients. There are times during an appointment where it is very important that the physician be available so as to gather important information about her patient, and other times when her mental resources should rather be dedicated to thinking about possible diseases, required tests, possible treatments, explaining to the patient, etc. How long a physician should be available will depend on the complexity of the case, but ideally, she should be available at least long enough to make sure that her understanding of the patient is accurate.



*Figure 6. Illustration of the possible degrees of availability of the physician depending on the degree of realisation of each of the conditions. The coloured dots represent different possible degrees of availability, appropriate to different moments of the medical interview. The red area represents the ideal degrees of availability of the physicians at times when understanding the patient is the central aim.*

For example, at the beginning of the appointment, when the physician welcomes the patient, the physician’s degree of availability does not need to be high, it can be near the blue dot. She can be warm and welcoming without investing much effort into understanding the patient. When the patient starts explaining what brings her to the consultation and what the matter is, the physician’s degree of availability needs to be much higher and closer to the red area, like the black dot, so that she can understand her patient’s needs and worries. When she has understood her patient’s problem (e.g. fear of losing control during delivery), she can start thinking about possible diagnoses and treatment options. At that moment, she is not trying to understand her patient and is therefore not available. Thus, even if the physician is still motivated to help the patient because she values her, her position is closer to the yellow dot. The physician’s degree of availability might need to be boosted again up to the red area, if the patient expresses some doubt or worry regarding the treatment offered or another problem that she faces.

The ideal degree of availability can thus vary from moment to moment, depending on the needs of each particular period of the interview. Especially during the anamnesis (history taking), the physician might constantly alternate between trying to understand the patient, thinking about possible diagnoses, asking more questions and trying to further understand the patient, until she arrives at a satisfactory understanding of the patient and her problem. This also suggests that understanding the patients correctly should be a recurring concern for

physicians so that they remain attentive and see when more understanding is needed. A physician that would be completely available for 10 minutes at the beginning of the interview, but not at all for the rest of the interview would run the risk of working on an understanding that is not correct and of being unable to adapt to how the patient evolves during the interview.

Hence, a constant high degree of availability is not necessary and can even be counterproductive. If the physician is constantly trying to understand her patient, she will not be able to think about possible diagnoses and treatment and will not be able to help the patient.<sup>31</sup> Availability is thus not too demanding for physicians, in the sense that they are not expected to be available all the time, but rather to make specific efforts at given times. What is required is that at some point of the interview, a physician manages to value her patient, at least temporarily, and be available to her, so that she can grasp the core of the problem, even if, overall, she finds this patient unpleasant or annoying.

### **6.1.6 Availability in the Different Medical Specialties**

Medicine is a vast domain and the job of a physician can vary greatly according to context (hospital vs. private practice) and specialty. In this chapter, I have been speaking about physicians without differentiating between the different specialties or context. The need for availability of a surgeon will likely be different from the one of a psychiatrist or of a family physician and what has been said above could therefore be further adapted and refined to the need of each specialty and context. Nevertheless, I have chosen to discuss the role of availability for the medical domain in an unspecified way because I believe that availability can benefit physicians in most specialties and in most contexts. Very few specialties might have no need for availability. It might be the case for physicians who work in labs such as pathologists or with images, like radiologists, and who have little or no contact with (living) patients and who do not need to understand the patient as a person. Most other specialties will benefit from availability whatever the context. Even if the surgeon does not need to be available to her patient during surgery, she does need some availability during the interview before surgery, to inspire trust to her patient and make sure that surgery is the best option for her.

## **6.2 Availability over Empathy?**

In the previous section, I have argued that availability is a good attitude for a physician to hold towards her patient. This does not imply that availability is a more appropriate or efficient

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<sup>31</sup> One exception might be psychotherapy, especially person-centred psychotherapy, since, according to Rogers, the attitude of availability is itself the therapy (Rogers 1961).

attitude than the ones that are currently promoted, the main one of those being empathy. In this section, I make one further step and explain shortly what attitudes have been taken to be the ideal ones for physicians and argue that although availability is very much in line with them, promoting availability rather than empathy to medical students and physicians would have two advantages.

### **6.2.1 Empathy in Medicine**

Many attitudes have been defended as the right one for a physician to hold towards her patients. Among the most popular ones we count “sympathy, empathy, compassion, pity, benevolence, beneficence, care, love, charity and others” (Gelhaus 2012a). What is meant by those terms often varies from author to author. There has nevertheless been a major trend for the past three decades that stands out: the one of empathy. Before the paradigm shift described above, the ideal attitude of the physician was widely taken to be detached concern, a form of impersonal concern for the patient that involves little or no emotional investment so as to protect the physician from compassion fatigue and from losing her objectivity (Halpern 2014; Cassell 2004). With the paradigm shift, the concept of empathy became at the centre of the stage. But staying a rightful heir to the detached concern theory, empathy was taken to be essentially a cognitive phenomenon. Empathy was conceived as cognitive empathy plus the ability to communicate it with the patient. This concept recognises the importance for the physician to understand her patient but to keep affectivity away. This is still how many authors conceive of empathy in the medical field (Hojat et al. 2001; Canale et al. 2012; Kelm et al. 2014).

Paradoxically, at the same time, it is recognised that if physicians are “uncaring brutes indifferent to the fate of their patients” (Curzer 1993, 55), patients will not be satisfied and will not trust their physicians. Some emotional involvement is thus taken to be necessary, but it should be kept to a minimum. What this emotional involvement consists in remains unspecified and its necessity often implicitly assumed. Facing the tension between the necessity for physicians to keep a clear (and unemotional) mind and the desire of patients to have caring physicians, some, like Curzer, have a more extreme view and argue that health care professionals (HCPs) “should act as if they cared for patients as individuals, but it is not necessary or even desirable for them really to care for patients. HCPs should act as if they are significantly emotionally attached, but in fact should involve their feelings relatively little” (Curzer 1993, 62).

By contrast, Halpern has played an important role in re-establishing the importance of the affective dimension of the physician’s attitude. According to her, physicians should be empathetic, but empathy should be conceived as cognitive and affective. In her book *From*

*Detached Concern to Empathy*, she argues that an emotional reaction to the patient is in fact highly valuable (Halpern 2001). This is not only because it can help the physician-patient relationship by making patients feel cared for, but also because physicians can use their emotional reactions to better understand their patients. Affective empathy can provide them with experiential understanding of their patient. In addition, if they remain aware of what belongs to their patients and what belongs to them, they can use it to better understand their patient. If they manage to remain curious and open towards their patients, they can keep trying to imagine their patient's experience until they get it right. Halpern takes the following example from her experience: she was called to see Mr. Smith "who had been a successful executive, and a powerful figure in his family, when a sudden neurological disorder paralysed him from the neck down, leaving him ventilator-dependent" (Halpern 2001, 86). Mr. Smith had withdrawn himself and refused to participate in therapy. Meeting with this helpless man, she asked him to speak with her. Mr. Smith effortfully tried but struggled so much he asked her to leave. "[She] felt hopeless about returning to talk with him and thought that this reflected [her] own lack of clinical experience" (Halpern 2001, 87). But someone else pointed that the hopelessness she was feeling might rather be her patient's. This helped her to distinguish her feelings from her patient's and she became curious about what Mr. Smith was feeling. Imagining what that patient must have felt like enabled her to find the right way to approach him, to communicate with him, and to make him feel understood.

Affective empathy towards patients has thus been slowly rehabilitated, but the ideal of concern for the patient (or a valuing of the patient as in availability) has remained mainly on the side. This, in a sense, is paradoxical, since it is most of the time granted that physicians should somewhat care about their patients. This might be because, like Chismar explains it, we do not want to convey the sense that physicians need to have a lasting concern for their patients, for that would be too demanding (Chismar 1988). A fleeting occurrent concern is nevertheless often presupposed and taken, often implicitly, to be part of empathy conceived either as cognitive empathy or as cognitive plus affective empathy.

In the end, although the term of empathy is almost unanimously promoted, there is some debate around what empathy consists in. This debate revolves around the following tension, rightfully pointed out by Halpern: "On the one hand, physicians strive for detachment to reliably care for all patients regardless of their personal feeling. Yet patients want genuine empathy from physicians and physicians want to provide it" (Halpern 2003, 670). Halpern made a big step forwards by showing how some affect is in fact useful to the medical practice, but it remains hard to draw the line between enough and too much (dangerous) affect.

### 6.2.2 Should We Promote Availability?

This being said, we can now wonder if the promotion of availability is in fact an improvement to the current state of empathy promotion. It should appear clearly that the promotion of availability is quite in line with the promotion of empathy (under all the conceptions described above). There is nothing completely revolutionary about availability and it is not a competing alternative to empathy. Like cognitive empathy, availability puts the understanding of the patient as its main aim. Like Halpern's concept of empathy, availability leads to affective empathy and experiential understanding. Lastly, in line with the widespread intuition around physicians and concern, availability involves a valuing of the patient that implies that at least during the interview, the physician is not indifferent to what is going on with the patient, respects the patients and genuinely wants her to be fine.

The difference between availability and the other attitudes promoted is that availability gives a central place to that concern/valuing element. Authors often seem to think that this element is (implicitly) part of empathy conceived as cognitive empathy, or as cognitive and affective empathy. As we have seen in the previous chapters and above, although a form of concern is often an outcome of affective empathy, it is distinct from it. Furthermore, a form of concern is valuable on its own ([see 6.1.4 above](#)) and can greatly influence how we understand another. The concept of availability is thus different from the ones of empathy defended in the medical field in that it spells out clearly what the concern element is and the role that it plays.

Availability has thus the advantage of being more comprehensive by putting all the elements that are essential to the ideal attitude of the physician under one concept. In addition, availability tells us how these elements should be combined to enable a good (experiential) understanding of the patient and will develop a relationship of trust with her: the valuing of the patient should motivate the effort to understand the patient. The work we have been doing in the previous chapters on how the different elements of availability interact with empathy, sympathy, experiential understanding, etc., is also useful to understand what happens when a physician is trying to understand her patient. This enhanced understanding can potentially be useful also to design better fitted or more comprehensive teachings for medical students.

Furthermore, I believe that using the concept of availability has the advantage of taking the focus away from the confusing term of empathy. This is not to say that the term of empathy itself is not useful, but its use in the medical domain can be confusing and convey a mistaken idea. Even if in the medical domain empathy has been conceived as mainly cognitive, empathy remains a term widely used to refer to a type of emotional feeling. By promoting empathy as the ideal and perhaps even unique attitude to aim at, I fear that it might convey the message that physicians should mainly aim at feeling some emotion towards her patient.

While I agree for the reasons given above that empathy (and sympathy) plays an important role in the doctor-patient relationship, it is clear that this should not be the unique aim. The feelings of empathy and sympathy that a physician might feel have only an instrumental value in that they serve the physician's understanding of the patient and convey to the patient the feeling that they are being cared for. As Leslie Jamison explains in her essay "The Empathy Exam", as she was about to get surgery to get a pacemaker fitted, she was panicking. At that time, she did not need her physician to panic with her or to feel really worried about her. What she needed was reassurance; and her physician giving it to her was the proof she needed that he understood and he cared: "It offered assurance rather than empathy, or maybe assurance was evidence of empathy, insofar as he understood that assurance, not identification, was what I needed most" (Jamison 2014, 17). An advantage of availability is thus that it does not risk conveying the idea that the physician should mainly aim at feeling what the patient is feeling or to feel sympathy for her. Rather, it suggests that the aim of the physician should be to understand the patient, in a caring or engaged way, through the valuing. Affective empathy and sympathy are still elicited by availability, but they risk not being taken as the ultimate aim to achieve in terms of physician attitude.

Consequently, availability is not a concept that competes with empathy. Rather, it is very much in line with what is already taken to be the ideal attitude of the physician and with what is currently being promoted in medical schools. However, the concept of availability has the double advantage of (1) encompassing all the essential elements leading to a good understanding of the patient, a good relationship with the patient, and a motivation to help the patient appropriately (and hopefully ethically) and (2) of avoiding the term of empathy that can be confusing because of its wide and loaded use. Hence, the work done in this thesis on availability helps clarify what physicians should aim at, and hopefully, how to teach it to them.

### **6.3 How Can We Promote and Teach Availability?**

If it is desirable to promote availability in the medical setting, we should inquire whether availability is something that can actually be promoted and taught. In this section, I explore how availability can be enhanced and the following remaining question of [chapter 1](#): can availability be willed and controlled? I will argue that it can only be partly controlled and hence willed and will consider ways to optimise our control over our availability.

#### **6.3.1 Trainable Competences of Availability**

Availability is a mental action or attitude in the general sense of the term that involves different competencies or skills, some of which have already been mentioned in the previous chapters.

I will consider those more systematically now by looking at each condition for availability and finding out the competencies involved in each of them.

*(1) pay attention with the intention to understand the other person*

Availability requires the ability to pay attention to another and, especially, to sustain that attention over time. As we have seen in [chapter 4](#), the ability to remain available over time plays an important role in bringing about the effects of availability (an accurate experiential understanding of another and a feeling of being understood in her). To be efficiently available, we need to be able to direct our attention onto the other and to remain focused on that object of attention. Studies show that sustained attention can be developed for example with mindfulness training (Chambers, Lo, and Allen 2008; Zeidan et al. 2010; Semple 2010; Tang et al. 2007), and other techniques such as Self-Alert Training (SAT) (O'Connell et al. 2008). This is an expanding domain of research and it is likely that new ways to enhance attention will soon be discovered.

In addition to being able to remain focused on the other person, we also need to be effective at understanding other people for being available. The mechanisms of affective and cognitive empathy that are at play here (see [chapters 3 and 4](#)) can be improved by exercising. For example, studies indicate that we can become better at cognitive empathy by training our ability to take another person's point of view through the use of fiction (novels, plays, films) (Hojat 2009; Hojat et al. 2013; Shapiro et al. 2006; Shapiro and Rucker 2003). Mascaro has also found that a certain type of meditation, compassion meditation, can increase empathic accuracy (Mascaro et al. 2013). Furthermore, as we have seen in [chapter 5](#), our ability to have an experiential understanding of others partly depends on our own experiences. It is very hard, and sometimes impossible for us to understand an experience we have not been acquainted with, not even remotely. Physicians are potentially often confronted to this type of situation since they encounter patients with various diseases and impairments they haven't experienced themselves. To help them understand their patients better, they can use simulations to get a sense of what their patients are going through. For example, Bunn and Terpstra found that simulated auditory hallucinations increased medical students' empathy for mentally ill patients (Bunn and Terpstra 2009). Similarly, Hailpern et al. found that understanding and empathy for people suffering from aphasia can be enhanced by using a Language Distortion Emulation Software (Hailpern et al. 2011). Such experiences and devices could be adapted for other impairments, so as to help professionals working with patients suffering from other disabilities to understand them better at the experiential level. Furthermore, knowing how we all have implicit biases that influence our thinking and our behaviour, it could be useful to help professionals discover their own biases through implicit association testing (for race, gender,

religion, sexuality, disability, etc.)<sup>32</sup> and to train them to overcome them. Reviews and meta-analyses show that procedures such as exposure to counter-stereotypical exemplars, evaluative conditioning, or procedures using motivation or goals can be effective (FitzGerald et al. 2019; Lai et al. 2014; Forscher et al. 2019). Further research needs to be conducted, however, to determine what procedures lead not only to a reduction of implicit bias but also of explicit bias or behaviour and on the long run (Forscher et al. 2019; Paluck and Green 2009).

*(2) value the other person*

For physicians to be available to their patients, they need to value them in a minimal way, that is, respect them and desire their wellbeing. Research shows that compassion meditation can foster a spontaneous valuing of other people, and especially, suffering ones (Bibeau, Dionne, and Leblanc 2016; Klimecki et al. 2014; Leiberg, Klimecki, and Singer 2011; Seppala et al. 2014).

*(3) the valuing motivates the paying attention*

It is harder to see what competence could sustain feature (3) of availability since it simply states that the valuing motivates the paying attention to someone with the intention to understand her. A valuing of another person can motivate one to do many things for another, such as, for example, take a concrete act to help the other person (see chapter 2, [section 2.2.3](#)). Therefore, a valuing of someone does not automatically or necessarily motivates us to try to understand that person. We can thus ask, what could help to reliably prompt such a motivation? Perhaps, as suggested by Halpern, physicians could cultivate curiosity about their patients.<sup>33</sup>

Research on curiosity is still in its early stages (Kidd and Hayden 2015), but there seems to be possible interventions to cultivate curiosity (Kashdan and Fincham 2004). The best way to do it seems to be to create social and contextual conditions that facilitate the perceptions and emotions that lead to greater curiosity” (Kashdan and Fincham 2004, 489). The three main factors are autonomy (the feeling that we have the choice), competence (the feeling that we have some competence considering the matter) and relatedness (for example, feelings of comfort and safety). The difficulty is that those interventions tend to be designed to cultivate curiosity towards a certain field or domain of investigation. It is not clear how this can be applied to curiosity towards what another person is experiencing. It is also not clear how interventions designed to foster those factors in training sessions can then lead to more curiosity for patients during medical interviews. Nevertheless, if it turns out that it is possible to develop our curiosity about what another person is experiencing or thinking is possible, then certainly this would

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<sup>32</sup> Harvard’s Project Implicit offers many Implicit Association tests: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/selectatest.html>

<sup>33</sup> Tim Carey has developed the concept of “empathic curiosity” which seems very close to availability (Carey 2008; Mcevoy et al. 2013).

promote availability. Raising awareness to availability and to the importance of understanding their patients accurately could also play a role. By drawing attention to the essential role that a correct understanding of the patient plays in good care, physicians could be more motivated to try to understand their patients rather than, for example, jumping to action or diagnoses.

There is a difficulty with curiosity, however: when we are curious about an object, we are motivated to learn more about it and to understand it for the sake of knowing or understanding, rather than for the sake of the object (Schmitt and Lahroodi 2008). If a physician is moved to understand her patient mainly out of curiosity, she will not be available to her patient. It is possible, nevertheless, that by cultivating curiosity for their patients, physicians might be more likely to inquire about their patients out of their valuing of them. This remains to be empirically verified.

### 6.3.2 Can We Control and Will Availability?

It seems, with our current state of knowledge, that there are at least several competencies of availability that can be developed so as to promote it. However, it does not follow that someone who has developed all those competencies would be perfectly able to become available at will. First of all, although attention can be exercised, it involves both controlled processes, that is, processes that result from intention, and automatic processes that do not result from intention (Wu 2014, 33)<sup>34</sup>. Consequently, while we can often decide what to pay attention to, our attention is also often caught up by external stimuli as when we hear a loud noise or see a funny shape. This means that even if we are trained to focus our attention on an object and to sustain it, we can be distracted against our will. Therefore, our ability to be available and to stay available partly escapes our will and partly depends on our environment and on the stimuli that we perceive.

Furthermore, as we have seen in [chapter 2](#), our attention (top down) is directed by our priorities and aims. This means that if our main priority and aim is to understand someone, our attention will be guided by it, and we will be able to be available to that person. If we are preoccupied with something else, however, this other aim or priority will be guiding our attention, thus preventing us from being available to that person, whether we want to pay attention to that further aim or not<sup>35</sup>. A physician can be distracted by personal problems, by other duties that she has which might constantly draw her attention. Thus, our ability to become

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<sup>34</sup> This difference is often spelled out in terms of top-down and bottom-up processes, top-down being the intentional and controlled processes and bottom-up being uncontrolled automatic processes (Katsuki and Constantinidis 2014, 509). Wu shows however that these distinctions do not amount to each other and that there can be both controlled and automatic top-down and bottom-up processes (according to his definitions) (Wu 2014, 34).

<sup>35</sup> This is a case of automatic top-down process of attention according to Wu. Although the mental process involves a non-perceptual psychological state and is thus, according to Wu (Wu 2014, 30), top-down, it does not result from attention and is thus automatic.

available to another depends on the absence of other preoccupations or at least on being able to forget about them for a while.

Lastly, it is obvious that we cannot control our valuing – or not – of other people. Even if we judge that every human being has value and deserves at least a minimal valuing, it does not follow that we will be able to see that person as minimally good and to value her. That gap between judgement and perception/desire is the object of much philosophical discussion (see for example Oddie 2005). This implies that a physician might be really committed to be available to each of her patients and to value them, and yet find herself unable to value a particular patient. This is even extremely likely if we think about how some patients can seem rude, mean, disgusting, etc. It might be extremely hard to see such patients under a positive light.

Nevertheless, it is not because there are aspects of availability that are not under our direct control that we are completely powerless. There are systems that we can set in place to minimise the chances of being unable to be available against our will. Considering the limits of attention, we can for example set up an environment that avoids as much as possible distraction. We can avoid, for example, to have reminders or notifications popping up on the computer or on the phone. Physicians can also plan and organise their time so as to enhance their chances to be available, for example by having, as much as possible, enough time for each patient and dedicated time as well for other type of tasks, such as administrative ones. Considering the limits of valuing, we have seen that perspective taking can be a good way to come to value someone (Batson 2011). Physicians can try to take the perspective of the patients they do not value. It might sometimes bring up a valuing for their patient and enable them to be available to them. However, in order to avoid empathic distress, they should imagine what it feels like for the patient to be in her situation and not how they would feel if they were themselves in that situation (Lamm, Batson, and Decety 2007).

In conclusion, availability can sometimes slip through our hands. It is not something that we can completely control since attention and valuing do not respond perfectly to our will. However, it is also not something that is completely independent of our will. We can choose to a certain extent what our aim is (e.g. understanding the other) and where to direct our attention. We can also, to a certain extent, choose to focus on the suffering of another or on the aspects of her that we like, so as to change our perception of her and come to value her. We can also take measures to minimise the effects of those uncontrollable aspects of availability. Furthermore, as we have seen above, we can develop competencies that play an important role in availability.

Hence, availability is not something that we can do at will, but it also is not completely out of our control. We thus have to agree with both Marcel, Murdoch, and Weil, who thought

availability cannot be willed and with Frye and Peck who thought it is a matter of discipline. It appears that they were all partly right.

### **6.3.3 On the Way to Designing the Teaching of Availability**

I would like to end this section with a few remarks on how availability could be taught to medical students and to physicians. Current research gives us ways to develop competences that play an important role in availability, but the results are clearly not exhaustive. Future research will no doubt provide us with more knowledge and ways to enhance availability effectively. Furthermore, this research does not tell us how to build an effective curriculum to teach availability, which is a whole object of research on itself. There are important limitations that have to be taken into account such as time – we cannot send all medical students on a two-week meditation retreat – and interest – students and physicians have to participate in it for it to be effective. We can also learn from measures that are already in place to promote empathy in medical students such as creative writing, acting, or other (Batt-Rawden et al. 2013; Hojat 2009; Hojat et al. 2013; Misra-Hebert et al. 2012).

In this section, I have explored whether availability can be enhanced and have shown that there are several competencies necessary for availability that can be developed through training. Much more research needs to be done to offer a tangible training for availability.

### **6.4 Availability and the Medical Domain: Ideas for Future Research**

In this chapter, I have argued that it is highly desirable for a physician to be available to her patient, because it enables the former to better understand the latter and helps the development of a good doctor-patient relationship, both leading to better care and healing outcomes. I have also argued that availability can be promoted through the development of the main competencies needed for availability. In this section, I would like to sketch ideas for future research and empirical application to the theoretical work done in this dissertation.

Should the teaching and promotion of availability be implemented in medical schools and hospitals? If availability does in fact have the benefits I have been describing, then, yes, the promotion of availability would be beneficial to the medical field. But whether availability does indeed have those benefits is an empirical question that should be tested beforehand. If those effects are not empirically verified, then the work done here needs to be revised and availability, as conceived here, should not be promoted. If the positive effects of availability are verified, by contrast, then we can start designing and testing an availability training.

Another question that will arise if the positive effects of availability are verified is whether the concept of availability should be taught and how. It might be the case that health professionals do not find the concept of availability compelling or convincing, or find it too complex. In that case, availability should not be taught as an important attitude for physicians and other health professionals to hold. However, even in that case, the competencies of availability could still be taught.

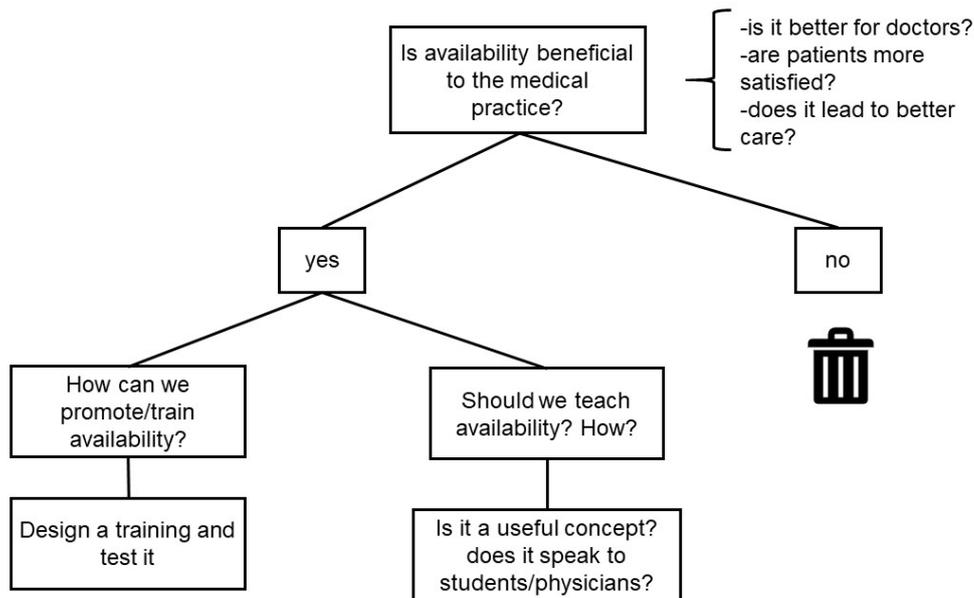


Figure 7. Figure showing what empirical questions about availability need to be asked and in what order.

There are thus several questions to ask, the first one being: does availability have the positive effects described here? This is not an easy question to test. It faces some of the same questions as the empirical study of empathy. First, how can we evaluate whether a physician is available and to what degree? This would require the elaboration of an evaluation scale for availability similar to the Jefferson Scale of Physician Empathy (Hojat et al. 2001). We could then ask physicians to evaluate their own availability through the scale or ask patients to evaluate their physicians' availability. There are then many questions that we could ask about availability: how are physicians feeling when they are available? Are they less at risk of burnout? Do they make more accurate diagnoses/less medical mistakes? Do patients share more information to available physicians? Are patients more satisfied with available physicians? Do they feel more understood? Do they trust their physicians more? Do they better comply with treatment? Are there better healing outcomes?

Testing the effects of availability with scientific methods is an ambitious endeavour. At this stage, I can only outline some ideas. To start, I would suggest exploring two questions: First, are patients more satisfied with their care and their relationship with their physician when

they perceive her as more available? To answer this question, we could conduct a project comprising both a qualitative and a quantitative study. The qualitative study could help me identify, with the patients themselves, what factors regarding the attitude of the physician are important for them and determine their satisfaction with the physician. This first step would also enable me to discuss with patients whether the availability of the physician is important for them. Those results could then be used to create a questionnaire for a quantitative study that would test which features of the physician's attitude correlate most with patient satisfaction. This would enable me to see if availability correlates better with patient satisfaction than other attitudes, such as empathy, for example. Patients suffering from a chronic disease such as diabetes could be ideal subjects since they need to consult often, and it is likely that the more patients need to see their physicians and the more their relationship and satisfaction with them will matter. Since patient satisfaction has already been correlated with healing outcomes (Sultan et al. 2011; Steinhausen et al. 2014; Hojat et al. 2011), such a study would be a preliminary but effective way to test whether physician availability has positive effects.

Assuming that availability positively affects the quality of patients' health care, it would be interesting to investigate whether the competencies for availability are adequately taught in medical curricula. For this, I could investigate how attitudinal and communication skills are currently being taught in medical schools. Such a project would enable me to see how developed the teaching of those skills are compared to the theoretical knowledge that we have of the ideal attitude of the physician. It would also enable me to see whether the key competences of availability are already taught or if the work that I have done here can help me identify complementary ways to develop them. Such a study would be, in a way, a feasibility test for the more ambitious project of teaching availability in medical schools. If all the competencies of availability are already taught, then availability has nothing practical to bring health practitioners and only has a conceptual additional value to bring. Such a study would also inform me on how uniform these trainings are between different universities.

In Switzerland, for example, the document PROFILES (Principal Relevant Objectives and Framework for Integrated Learning and Education in Switzerland) defines the sets of objectives that need to be taught to and acquired by medical students (Joint Commission of the Swiss Medical Schools, s. d.). Communication skills and empathy belong to those objectives, but each university is free to implement them in its own way. As a result, it is likely that teachings might be very different from university to university and it is not clear what communication or empathic skills are promoted and how. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate and compare what is taught in medical curricula and evaluate the content and the coherence of and between these teachings and their closeness to availability.

## **6.5. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have explored how the work on availability done in this dissertation can be useful to the practical domain of medicine. I have argued that availability is key for reaching the goals of medicine. Physicians should be available at an appropriate degree and time of the medical interview not just to make patients happy and make them like their physicians, but in order to provide good care. It is important for physicians to be available so that they can understand their patients accurately, which is an essential step for making a diagnosis and deciding what treatment to offer. Availability also promotes a good doctor-patient relationship. This is important since it encourages patients to disclose more information and motivate them to comply with treatment, which both also play an important role in care. I have also shown that availability requires competencies that can be developed and thus that availability could potentially be taught in medical schools and postgraduate education. For all this work to be practically useful, however, those hypotheses need to be empirically investigated and tested. In the last sections of the chapter, I have started to explore how this could be done.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I argued that availability is a mental action that we perform when we are paying attention to another with the intention to understand her because we value her. Availability can take different forms depending on how much we value its recipient, how focused we are on her, whether that her situation elicits sympathy or not, etc. When availability occurs in face-to-face encounters, it mainly involves listening and observing that person, but in other settings, it can involve other actions such as looking for information online or asking questions to a third person. Availability is closely connected to other phenomena such as sympathy, care, and respect, because they involve a valuing of their object as well. This is why being available often involves caring about someone, respecting someone and feeling sympathy for her. What is unique about availability, however, is that it is the only phenomenon that encompasses both the conative component of valuing and a strong cognitive component—aiming at understanding another.

This dual structure makes availability effectively pro-social. Being available to someone greatly enhances our chances to understand her. If that person needs help, availability can allow us to identify what she needs and, through its valuing component, motivate us to help. This understanding of another also elicits feelings of closeness and connection and, if perceived by the recipient, makes this person feel understood, valued and accepted, which help us bond and develop a satisfying relationship. Because availability is an efficient way to generate those effects, it plays an important role in our social lives in general and especially in contexts where providing help is part of our professional duties.

I have started to explore the practical importance of availability for one of those professional contexts—the one of medicine. I argued that it is highly instrumental for a physician to be available to her patient to achieve the goals of medicine. It helps the physician understand what the problem of the patient is and what she needs, which put her in a good position to make an accurate diagnosis and to identify the best treatment option. By making the patient feel understood and cared for, availability also improves the doctor-patient relationship, which makes the patient more prone to confiding—thereby deepening the physician's understanding—and produces better healing outcomes. These findings are encouraging and suggest that availability should be further investigated. The claims made in this thesis should be empirically verified and, if they are, ways to promote and teach availability should be developed.

The main contribution of this work is practical. Sympathy motivates pro-social behaviour, but its effects are limited because it is epistemically weak and does not yield interpersonal understanding by itself. Promoting sympathy alone to enhance pro-social behaviour is

therefore only partially effective. Availability seems to have the advantage of being both epistemically strong and effectively motivational. The chance that it produces effective helping behaviour and satisfying relationships is thus higher.

This thesis also makes more philosophical contributions. Firstly, it makes a historical contribution by explaining a concept that was developed concomitantly by several philosophers in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It also offers a possible elucidation of Marcel's (and others') rather obscure claim that we see others as persons only when available to them. This work could therefore be valuable to Marcel's scholars.

Secondly, [chapter 3](#) contributes to the current debate on empathy, sympathy, and care, by disambiguating these notions and explaining how they are related. There is a lot of verbal dispute among philosophers of empathy because they use the same terms to refer to different phenomena. In addition, the fact that there are different types of relations between those notions (conceptual, causal, dispositional) and that many of these notions are connected because they all share a valuing component is rarely pointed out. By shedding some light on those facts, that chapter can greatly contribute to clarifying that debate.

Thirdly, the description of interpersonal understanding in [chapter 5](#) shows that understanding someone's mental state(s) is a cognitive enterprise that goes beyond the ability to identify that state and to predict future behaviour. Most of the debate on social cognition revolves around those two abilities, but if my description of interpersonal understanding is accurate, it is a wider and even more complex question. The study of social cognition could thus be enriched by a more detailed consideration of interpersonal understanding. Furthermore, this description of understanding raises questions regarding some theories of social cognition. More precisely, it is not clear how the way we identify others' mental states relates to our understanding of those states. Addressing those two questions together could greatly enhance our understanding of social cognition.

It is nevertheless important to be aware of the limitations of availability. The analysis of availability developed here suggests that it is effectively pro-social and that there could be important benefits to promoting it. I am, however, not claiming that availability is a panacea. I have already explained that availability does not always have an added and practical value. There are situations where taking some time to understand someone's perspective is not the most relevant or stringent thing to do, such as when someone is having a heart attack.

Furthermore, availability is neither necessary nor sufficient to provide effective help or to bond with others. It is not necessary because it is possible to come to understand and help others efficiently while being motivated by a sense of professional or moral duty, for example, rather than a valuing. It is also possible to bond with someone we do not understand, or at least not completely. For example, we can be friends with people from a completely different culture and have close relationships with animals. Availability is also not sufficient because it

does not necessarily yield understanding. For example, in some situations, we might not have a reliable source of information or be unable to understand someone because we are too different. In some instances, availability might also not produce helping behaviour. Despite our availability and our motivation to help, we might not act on that motivation because it is too costly for us, for example. It is also possible that although we understand someone and see that we share something significant, we do not feel close to that person and do not bond with her because, for instance, we find her distant or annoying. Being available thus offers no guarantee that the pro-social effects I have described will in fact occur. A better understanding of the conditions that need to be met for availability to deliver could help us evaluate and optimise the effectiveness of availability. For example, a physician's communications skills are extremely important to develop a good relationship with the patient, and it would be important to teach them along with availability.

Since availability and sympathy both involve a valuing of someone, we also need to consider the possibility that availability falls prey of the moral limitations of sympathy as well. One of the main problems of sympathy is that it can make us blind to the needs of those we do not feel sympathy for (Batson et al. 1995). Because we feel extreme sympathy for an individual, e.g. for a dog that fell into a well or a child needing a transplant, we might be motivated to use a lot of resources to help, although if we consider the needs of others, the allocation of resources appears disproportionate and unfair. This is likely to happen with availability as well. If we are available to one single individual, we will focus on that person only and become extremely sensitive to her need, be motivated to fulfil them and we might fail to consider the needs of others simply because we are not thinking about them.

Another problem with sympathy is that our ability to experience it for others is biased. We feel sympathy more easily for people who are like us and who belong to a shared group (Stürmer et al. 2006). We are, for instance, more likely to feel sympathy and to help people who support our football team rather than those who support the opposing team. It is likely that this discrepancy comes from the fact that our ability to value certain people is biased. We might, unconsciously or not, value more the people that are from the same race, the same country as us, or who seem to be educated. We might then find it easier to be available to some, and thus bond with them and be motivated to help them, than to others. Furthermore, as argued for in [chapter 5](#), we are more likely to understand individuals that are like us, which makes them more likely to benefit from the positive effects of availability. But those we are less likely to be available to and to understand might not be less deserving of help. This might result, again, in an unfair allocation of resources.

Lastly, sympathy can only have a limited number of targets at a single time. We can be deeply moved by the plight of one single individual, but not so much if many people are in that situation (Slovic 2010). We saw in [chapter 2](#), that indeed, it is difficult for us to be available to

many individuals at a given time and the more our availability is distributed and the less likely it is that it will deliver its positive effects. We saw that we can nevertheless be available to a group, but the bigger the group and the less fine-grained our understanding of the individuals that constitute this group can be and the less effective our availability can be.

Thus, availability seems to face the same moral limitations as sympathy. Availability is effective to motivate pro-social behaviour towards the individual we are available to, but what we are motivated to do for that person might not be fair considering the needs of others. If availability is promoted, it is therefore important to also put forward those shortcomings and to look for ways to overcome them. I already explored in [chapter 6](#) ways to promote unbiased and equal minimal valuing of to every patient and, potentially, everyone. As put forward in [chapter 6](#) as well, being available does not exempt us from performing ethical analyses. Although availability puts the physician in a good position to apply the four principles of biomedical ethics, they need to be applied to enhance the chances of reaching an ethical outcome. The principle of justice defends the needs of others and of asking for a fair attribution of resources. This is also valid outside of the medical context. It is good if availability can motivate us to help others in an effective way, but whether we *should* do so and how are further questions to ask.

This thesis also has limitations. There are questions regarding availability that I have not addressed. In particular, I have not looked into the morality of availability. Marcel, Weil, and Murdoch, at least, seemed to consider availability as the morally appropriate response to have towards others (Weil 1959, 153). According to them, it is the just way to be towards them. We can thus ask whether we have a moral duty to be available to others in some situations. We can also investigate what role availability can play in care ethics. As we saw in [chapter 2](#), Noddings considers availability to be an essential component of care. It would thus be interesting to see more precisely the importance that availability can have in such theories.

I have also made many claims about availability based on personal experience and observations of others. Such claims are in need of empirical verification. Further research is thus required to enable us to evaluate more objectively the value of availability. Furthermore, topics such as interpersonal understanding and bonding are extremely complex and many factors which can play a role in those phenomena had to be discarded for their analysis. Those descriptions could be further refined and by doing so, we might find that availability is not as potent as we have found. For example, other factors than interpersonal understanding might be better predictors of closeness and bonding, making the effects of availability only incidental. Similarly, we would have to study other contexts than medicine to see if availability also plays an important role in them or if its importance for medicine is an exception.

This dissertation yields positive results for availability. It suggests that we could benefit greatly from enhancing our ability to be available to others. But many questions remained to

be asked. More importantly, for this thesis to have a practical value, its results need to be empirically tested and, if verified, implemented. Much research is therefore still needed. The work done here is hence merely the first step into the study of availability.

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