

The “We”: A Few Reflections on its Attentional Dynamics, Between Primordial and Interspecific Configurations

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the formation of the “we” as a relational and attentional phenomenon, drawing on developmental psychology, phenomenology, and multispecies studies. It challenges individualist ontologies by showing that subjectivity and intersubjectivity co-emerge through shared attention—an embodied, pre-reflective mode of relational presence first observable in early infant-caregiver dynamics. Through the lens of joint attention and the mirror neuron system, the study articulates a neurophenomenological account of how collective intentionality and mutual understanding are rooted in attentional alignment. Extending these insights beyond the human, it examines how attentional dispositions can be cultivated in interspecific contexts, particularly through Donna Haraway’s concept of *companion species*. By situating the “we” as a dynamic field of co-attention—rather than an aggregate of discrete individuals—the paper invites new models for thinking multispecies relations and ethical responsiveness. In a time marked by fractured attention, ecological urgency, and shifting modes of relationality, this exploration offers a philosophical foundation for reimagining what it means to share a world.

Keywords: Joint attention; Intersubjectivity; Attentional dynamics; Phenomenology; Subjectivity; Multispecies relations; Embodied cognition

The “we” is a concept—fluent, mobile, protean—unfolding through multiple and often elusive dynamics. These are not primarily discursive but belong to the realm of the affective and the emotional. Rooted in attachment and trust, the “we” refers to relational processes that are subtle, spontaneous, and fragile.

More than a mere aggregate of “I”s, it designates the emergence of shared dynamics—of responsibilities, practices, and temporalities.

The *we* manifests first and foremost as a particular orientation of attention, a distinctive attentional style: an attention no longer focused solely on the individual, on their subjectivity and singular experience, but one that makes space for the other—for a multiplicity of perspectives and possible worlds. It becomes attuned to the needs and aims of a collective, lends this collective a body through coordinated action, and to varying degrees, relinquishes itself to a whole animated by its own dynamics.

Deriving the *we* from an association of *I*s fails to account for the ontogenetic process of human development as studied, notably, in developmental psychology. As we will see through E. Bimbenet's phenomenological approach to joint attention¹, both *I* and *we* arise from a differentiation within the undifferentiated whole that initially encompasses the infant and their caregiver—the totality of the newborn's world. This progressive cleavage is rooted in the development of the child's attentional capacities. Subjectivity and intersubjectivity emerge together, in the very movement of gaze-following, through which a shared attentional space is constituted. Within this shared space opened by joint attention, the world appears as a multiplicity of perspectives: existence is co-perceived, subjectivity becomes decentered, and it discovers itself in and through intersubjectivity.

If this disposition to share an attentional field is a fundamental criterion of humanization, must it be limited to our fellow humans? Attending to non-human life forms has become an essential concern in our contemporary epoch, shaped as it is by vast anthropogenic environmental disruptions. Several philosophers and anthropologists invite us to consider the “crisis of sensitivity” we may be undergoing, and to let it guide a transformation in how we relate to the living world—one that makes room for the presence of non-human beings, beginning with the simple yet radical act of attending to them. Extending our inquiry into the *we* and its attentional dynamics, we will explore how its scope might be expanded, notably by drawing on the work of Donna Haraway.

Primordial and Primary We

We are not born alone, and the human infant is incapable of surviving alone during the first years of life. And this survival includes the primary need for connection and affective attachment. One might thus affirm: “We are born under the sign of connection, not isolation.”²

In the ontogenetic development of the human being, developmental psychology observes and studies a primary indistinction between the newborn and their caregiver (or reference figure). This stage has been described as “intersubjectivity without subjects”³: the infant does not distinguish their own body from the one that nourishes it. The caregiver is experienced as an extension of the infant's own being. In this primordial *we*, it is the bodies that speak and respond to one another—intuitively.

Progressively, as the infant's brain and attentional capacities develop, a differentiation takes shape—generally around the ninth month. The undifferentiated whole undergoes a rupture. By following the gaze of the caregiver, the infant begins to apprehend a reality exterior to the

¹ *L'attention*. (Dijon: Éd. Alter, 2010). 93-110.

² *L'attention*. 105.

³ Joachim Bauer, *Pourquoi je ressens ce que tu ressens: la communication intuitive et le mystère des neurones miroirs* (Paris: G. Trédaniel, 2012). 67.

primordial *we*, which until then was the totality of their world. With this gaze-following emerges otherness—and, in turn, both a *we* and an *I*. The *I* thus appears within a shared space, at the heart of a *we*: it is neither prior nor posterior, but co-constituted with the *we*. Subjectivity and intersubjectivity arise together, against the backdrop of alterity.

What precedes this emergence—the undifferentiated primordial *we*—is not properly speaking a “*we*,” since it is not yet an experience of intersubjectivity. It constitutes the whole of the infant’s world: there is neither subject nor alterity. As E. Bimbenet emphasizes in his article “For a Phenomenological Approach to Joint Attention,” joint attention involves a necessary disjunction of the self toward the other. It is not a matter of linking two already-separated consciousnesses, but of positing disjunction as the precondition of conjunction.

Joint attention is thus both scission and reunion. It entails two simultaneous and distinct movements: on the one hand, the *I* perceives the otherness of the world, differentiates itself, and actualizes itself in this differentiation; on the other hand, a shared attentional space opens—a space in which the *I* and the *we* jointly experience a world open to a plurality of perspectives. The undifferentiated whole of the primordial *we* precedes the *I*, which emerges through the consciousness of the *we* by interposing a third term: otherness.

Subjectivity and intersubjectivity arise through the same movement of becoming aware of a radical alterity—that of a world that unfolds through the plurality of others’ perspectives, “the world escapes along endless lines of horizon.”⁴

It is through the experience of this alterity that the poles of subjectivity and intersubjectivity become actualized—as distinct yet interwoven perspectives on a shared object. Joint attention thus separates more than it unites: the disjunction that opens within the infant’s undifferentiated world marks the irruption of alterity. In this rupture takes form the intersubjective *we*, now constituted by subjects who begin to grasp themselves as such. The *we* can thus emerge upon the background of otherness, and in and through this *we*, the *I* appears.

To experience the world is to be a subject exposed to and exploring what lies beyond itself. Consciousness arises from the experience of alterity; every consciousness is a consciousness *of*—that is, of an object that cannot be reduced to the act of intending it. The *I* emerges through a movement of decentering, through the opening onto a plurality of perspectives, in response to an other who, in the same gesture, both unveils itself and withdraws. Subjectivity is intersubjectivity: the *I* emerges from the *we*. The intersubjective space of the dual relation—the primary *we*—is where the infant progressively experiences subjectivity within intersubjectivity, and to grow is to mature in one’s relation to otherness⁵.

⁴ *L’attention*. 109.

⁵ *L’attention*. 107.

Paradoxically, it is by moving away from itself—into the horizon of the world and the open plurality of perspectives on that world—that the *I* emerges as such. The *I* appears in the very act of stepping away from itself: it becomes a constitutive pole only insofar as, through decentering, it discovers itself in exposure to the plurality of perspectives. It is by letting go of a singular point of view that the subjective point of view comes into view.

The primordial *we* is fissured by the experience of alterity, and in the space that thus opens, a primary *we* emerges: the dual relation in which subjectivity takes form through intersubjectivity, through the experience of a shared attentional field.

The Shared Attentional Space and the Intersubjective Body

The capacity to share an attentional space with another human is innate. In proto-conversations, the infant "does not need to move toward the other, to bridge the distance between the two bodies, to pierce the wall of a foreign interiority: for the other is there, given in and through their body, as immediately as I am given to myself."⁶ Whether in the undifferentiated primordial *we* or in the primary *we* of the dual relation, the infant's body merges with that of the caregiver. There is a carnal donation of the other—in gestures, postures, intonations, and affective expressions that resonate through the body.

Understanding the other, then, does not occur through analogical reasoning, but through an intuitive perception of their movements and states. Gestures exist *in* the *we*: they resonate within the shared space, they are *between us*, and *of us both*. Bodies are not boundaries but surfaces of contact⁷.

This shared space is an attentional space. The phenomenologist Tran Duc Thao⁸ describes it as a curving arc of movement: the unidirectional vector of intentionality bends to open an intersubjective scene and enable the sharing of a common horizon. This development is particularly observable in the deictic gesture, when the child points to an object, drawing the adult's attention to what interests them. For a long time, this gesture was interpreted as driven by an intention to grasp. However, experimental studies show that the mere act of sharing attention appears to bring the child joy. The pointing gesture thus may not aim at prehension, but at the creation of a shared attentional space⁹.

In this, humans differ from great apes. Although apes are capable of deictic gestures—especially in captivity, when they cannot access visible objects—they use them only instrumentally, to obtain

⁶ *L'attention*. 105.

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible: suivi de Notes de travail*, Tel 36 (Paris: Gallimard, 2016). 318.

⁸ Đứơc Thảo Trầ̀n, *Recherches sur l'origine du langage et de la conscience*, Collection Philosophie (Paris: Éditions Delga, 2021). 26.

⁹ *L'attention. Par-delà la reconnaissance. E.Alloa*. 125-141. 138.

the designated object. Apes show proto-prehensive demonstration in constrained contexts, and they also display reciprocal attention—for example during grooming—but these two capacities do not converge into situations of joint attention¹⁰. The capacity for joint attention, the formation of a shared attentional field, would thus constitute a fundamental marker of humanization.

Michael Tomasello, in *The Origins of Human Communication*, describes it as "the capacity of individual organisms to understand that their conspecifics are like them—that they have an intentional and mental life similar to their own."¹¹ This capacity for attentional sharing is a necessary condition for sociocultural transmission, as it enables the pooling of cognitive resources. It is because we can share our attention around an object—material or intellectual—that we are able to learn and jointly develop the knowledge and practices associated with it.

Mirror Neurons and the Neurophysiology of Intersubjectivity

This perceptual and intentional sharing has a neurophysiological substrate known as the mirror neuron system: a category of neurons that fire both when an individual performs an action and when they perceive stimuli linked to that same action—whether through sight, sound, or even verbal description.

Mirror neurons are found in several brain regions, particularly those associated with action, emotion, and self-representation. They also play a key role in regions involved in language. Discovered in 1996 by Giacomo Rizzolatti during research on the planning and execution of goal-directed actions in monkeys, these neurons were observed to fire not only during the execution of an action, but also when observing another individual performing that same action¹².

Their function, then, would be "the recognition and understanding of the meaning of motor events—in other words, of the actions of others"¹³: an implicit, pragmatic, and pre-reflective form of understanding.

More developed in humans than in monkeys, the mirror neuron system enables us not only to understand the meaning of others' actions through motor knowledge—which underlies our own capacity to act—but also to grasp their emotions and intentions. This supports Merleau-Ponty's claim: "The [...] understanding of gestures is achieved through the reciprocity between my intentions and others' gestures, and between my gestures and the intentions readable in others'

¹⁰ *L'attention*.139.

¹¹ Michael Tomasello and Yves Bonin, *Aux origines de la cognition humaine*, La Découverte poche (Paris: la Découverte, 2022).

¹² Giacomo Rizzolatti, Corrado Sinigaglia, and Marilène Raiola, *Les neurones miroirs* (Paris: O. Jacob, 2014).92

¹³ Rizzolatti, Sinigaglia, and Raiola.111.

conduct. Everything happens as if the other's intention inhabited my body, or my intentions theirs."¹⁴

The mirror neuron system enables a direct, pre-reflective understanding, and “this understanding determines the emergence of a potentially shared space of action. This space is the origin of increasingly elaborate forms of interaction (imitation, intentional communication, etc.), which in turn rely on ever more refined and differentiated mirror neuron systems. The study of these mechanisms helps us begin to understand the shared functional matrix in which the network of our inter-individual and social relations takes shape.”¹⁵

It thus appears that, ultimately, the *we* is not posterior to the *I*, but rather the space in which the *I* emerges. The *we* is a particular attentional modality, one that is actualized within a shared attentional space—whose cerebral substrate is the mirror neuron system, distributed across multiple brain regions. While mirror neuron systems are observed in other animals, they are considerably more developed in humans, and the capacity to share an attentional space, to form a common horizon, is a specifically anthropic trait.

Yet this fundamentally human capacity to open oneself to other perspectives on the world need not remain confined to human points of view: it can extend to the perspectives of non-human life forms. Mirror neurons, after all, are responsive to stimuli originating from biological beings other than humans. And although doing so requires a certain flexibility, attention—when directed toward and engaged with other ways of being alive—enriches itself in its understanding of the world's diversity. Is it, then, possible to think an interspecific *we*?

Interspecific We

The question of an interspecific *we* arises within a particular ontological framework: that of modern naturalism. As highlighted in the work of Philippe Descola¹⁶, many human societies live in interspecific communities where non-humans play a vital role. Whether through animist or totemist ontologies, interspecificity is a given – expressed through distinct modes specific to each cosmology, and with varying degrees of significance granted to non-human entities in maintaining communal balance.

The interspecific *we* is thus a lived reality for many human groups. Although largely absent from the naturalist framework that structures dominant Western epistemologies, it nonetheless finds marginal expression in certain practices. This reality, however, remains both under-acknowledged

¹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Tel 4 (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).215.

¹⁵ Rizzolatti, Sinigaglia, and Raiola, *Les neurones miroirs*.202.

¹⁶ Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, 2018.

and under-theorized, as naturalism rests on a dualistic separation between nature and culture, and thus between humans and non-humans.

Donna Haraway—zoologist and philosopher—aims to explore, conceptualize, and invite reflection on these interspecific relational practices. She draws, for instance, on the practices of dog agility sports¹⁷ and pigeon fancying¹⁸ to illuminate two aspects of her thought: *becoming-with* and *companion species*. These are entry points into inventive relational perspectives in a world shaken by the recognition of multispecies interdependence.

In the *Companion Species Manifesto*, Haraway proposes to think through the multiple attachments that weave our experience. She focuses on the mutual relationships we develop with dogs to "learn an ethic and politics devoted to the proliferation of relationships with other beings who matter—*significant others*."¹⁹ The category of companion species extends far beyond that of domestic pets: it encompasses "any organic being to which human existence owes its very being—and vice versa."

It includes, for example, rice, bees, tulips, or even gut flora²⁰, emphasizing their co-constitutive and co-evolutionary roles. Haraway's aim is to promote the flourishing of these relationships through their recognition and to acknowledge their historicity—in order to abolish the nature-culture divide, which she insistently writes as a single word: *natureculture*.

The manifesto is a "declaration of kinship," calling us to make kin with the living beings around us, to open narratives of interspecific coexistence and sociality that engage other modes of attention. It is about cultivating attentiveness toward *significant others*, thinking through co-constitutive relational modalities, just as we have done in relation to joint attention—but this time opened to interspecific plurality, where relationships reveal partial connections.

The attentional field here extends to non-human beings with whom communication becomes possible through disciplined attention—not through anthropomorphic projection, but through a sensitive listening to signals emitted by the more-than-human other. The goal is to "imagine positive ways of living together with all the species alongside whom human beings have emerged on this planet"²¹. This requires the "research-creation of attentional modes"²².

¹⁷ Donna Jeanne Haraway, Jérôme Hansen, and Vinciane Despret, *Manifeste des espèces compagnes: chiens, humains et autres partenaires*, 2019.

¹⁸ Donna Jeanne Haraway and Vivien García, *Vivre avec le trouble* (Vaulx-en-Velin, France: Les éditions des mondes à faire, 2020).

¹⁹ Haraway, Hansen, and Despret, *Manifeste des espèces compagnes*.14.

²⁰ Haraway, Hansen, and Despret.21.

²¹ Haraway, Hansen, and Despret.7.

²² Haraway, Hansen, and Despret. 51.

Haraway uses the practice of agility—a team sport involving a human and a dog completing an obstacle course—as a conceptual lens for this inquiry. Agility becomes a way of “becoming more present to the world, more attuned to the demands of our partners, at all levels where the creation of more livable worlds is at stake”²³.

This interspecific sport relies on a strong bond of communication, a synchronization of presences, enabling attunement and coordination between two living beings of different species. Haraway identifies specific traits in this relationship, pointing to practical modalities for entering into companionship with non-human life. The foundation of these practices is presence—attentional availability. By attending to the other and remaining receptive to their expressions, a space of mutual understanding can emerge.

A bond of trust arises through the consistency of this presence, and through the coherence, integrity, and honesty of the communicative motives. Bodily expression—through posture, gestures, facial expressions, and gaze—enables communication across irreducible difference.

The task is to honor reciprocity and listen to what the dog is expressing, within a specific attentional mode, one open to the animal’s radical alterity.

*"What matters here is to accept that one can never fully know either the other or oneself, while never ceasing to question the status of what emerges at each moment in the relationship. [...] Every form of ethical relation—whether operating within or across species—is woven from the same robust thread of constant vigilance toward alterity-in-relation. We are not autonomous, and our existence depends on our ability to live together. The obligation is to continually ask who is present, and what emerges from the relation."*²⁴

Mutual understanding—with humans or non-humans—requires an attentional disposition open to alterity, capable of decentering from its own perspective and moving toward that of the other, of loosening its own view with an imaginative flexibility open to surprise, making room for the other.

This attentional disposition rests on a respect for irreducible alterity, one that is rich with its own perspectives, and it is played out through the body—especially in the gaze, a gaze open and available to the other.

Toward Multispecies Futures: From Attentional Discipline to Ethical Relationality

This question of the quality of the gaze is particularly well illustrated in Haraway’s treatment of pigeons as figures of *becoming-with*. Ubiquitous in urban environments, they hover somewhere between indifference and disdain: our eyes brush past them daily, rarely registering their presence

²³ Haraway, Hansen, and Despret. 51.

²⁴ Haraway, Hansen, and Despret. 44.

in any meaningful way. And yet, pigeons can also be vital partners and companions—used historically to carry messages, to spy, or to assist in rescue operations. They are, in Haraway’s words, “competent agents [...] who make each other capable, and who enable human beings to engage in situated social, ecological, behavioral, and cognitive practices.”²⁵

Their orientation and observational capacities are remarkable—exploited both by pigeon fanciers in competitive contexts and by the military for strategic purposes. Cognitively, they have demonstrated surprising capacities: outperforming three-year-old children in self-recognition tests²⁶, identifying individuals in photographs, distinguishing between Monet and Picasso, and even classifying artworks by style and era. And to reach these conclusions, researchers have had to partner with pigeons in designing experimental protocols; they have, as Haraway writes, “made each other capable of something new in the world of interspecific relations.”²⁷

Like pigeon fanciers, scientists are thus led to adopt the pigeons’ point of view, to understand their modes of knowing, and to seek channels for interspecific communication. These interspecific collaborations require that we recognize the more-than-human other as worthy of attention, and that we engage in a relationship of active reciprocity—where humans are willing to learn *with* the pigeon.

Through such engagement, ties of mutual understanding may begin to form within an interspecific *we*, attuned to an irreducible alterity and committed to appreciating partial connections. These interspecific bonds are woven through processes of *becoming-with*, in which each agent learns alongside the other and undergoes mutual transformation. To cultivate, build, and sustain such ties is to help “shape multispecies futures conducive to life—not in innocence, but in the effort to become, with one another, more responsible; that is, more capable of responding.”²⁸

Haraway’s approach to interspecific bonds resonates closely with the phenomenological account of joint attention. In both cases, the challenge is to cultivate attentional dynamics open, that holds space for alterity. Whether intra- or interspecific, the *we* emerges from an attentional movement that, in releasing the *I*, enables it to discover itself through relation to the other.

Phenomenology is particularly well suited to approaching interspecific dynamics, for it seeks to “bracket the self’s tendency to impose itself, so as to let phenomena arise as they give themselves [...] in an active openness proceeding from withdrawal.”²⁹ Such disciplined attention can attune

²⁵ Haraway and García, *Vivre avec le trouble*. 31.

²⁶ “Pigeons Show Superior Self-Recognition Abilities To Three Year Old Humans,” ScienceDaily, accessed July 1, 2025, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/06/080613145535.htm>.

²⁷ Haraway and García, *Vivre avec le trouble*. 36.

²⁸ Haraway, Hansen, and Despret, *Manifeste des espèces compagnes*. 8.

²⁹ *L’attention*. 62.

itself to forms of life that are diverse and plural, radically other, and expressive of their own modes of sense-making. Interspecific boundaries may then become surfaces of contact—porous thresholds that open to *becomings-with*, to emergent *wes* carrying seeds of possible futures in a world in crisis.

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