

DANIEL STERN AND THE PROCESS OF HUMANIZATION

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Abstract The present paper aims to outline the process of humanization using certain concepts proposed by Daniel Stern in his works. Whereas Marc Richir has drawn on Husserl and applied phenomenological concepts upon psychoanalytical theories, for example those of Donald Winnicott, in Stern we can find an alternative to this process. By following Stern's thematizations of the infant's life, as they evolved throughout his work, I want to analyse the concepts of affect attunement, moments of meeting and vitality affects, so that I can prove that there might be such a thing as the Sternian process of humanization.

Keywords Daniel Stern, affect attunement, moments of meeting, vitality affects, process of humanization, sublime.

Introduction

In the recent phenomenological and psychological literature, authors have been stressing the issue of the process of humanization. From his very first written books, Marc Richir has been talking about the anthropological institution,¹ which was later on linked with the issue of the humanization process. Very interestingly, in his theory on the process of humanization, Richir draws mostly on the psychoanalytical works of Donald Winnicott. The Belgian phenomenologist attempted at explicating the process of humanization through Winnicott's late theories concerning the transitional objects and transitional phenomena.² Nevertheless, Richir borrowed some key concepts from Winnicott's late work *Playing and Reality*, and he applied certain phenomenological theories upon them, to prove once again the compatibility

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¹ Marc Richir, *Recherches Phénoménologique (IV, V): Du Schématisme Phénoménologique Transcendental* (Bruxelles: Ousia, 1983), 247-248.

² Marc Richir, *Phantasia, Imagination, Affectivité: Phénoménologie et anthropologie phénoménologique* (Grenoble: Jerome Millon, 2004), 508.

between phenomenology and psychoanalysis. Therefore, Richir applied concepts from Husserl's manuscripts upon Winnicott's thematization in order to show the importance of the psychoanalytical theories for the process of rethinking transcendental phenomenology. Despite that I could have talked as well of Richir's perspective upon Winnicott's theories concerning the process of humanization, my starting point will be the work of Daniel Stern. Alongside Colwyn Trevarthen, Daniel Stern challenged certain paradigms from classical psychoanalytical theory, and with the help of more advanced psychological investigation methods, he tried to bring a fresh perspective into the field of child psychology. This fresh perspective involves certain philosophical concepts and theories, which I am going to study in this present paper. In Daniel Stern, one can find an alternative to Winnicott's process of humanization, and this process is, in our opinion, threefold. This threefold character of the process of humanization implicates the development of Stern's own thought. Here one could remember the discussion about affect attunement from *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, the concept of "Moments of Meeting" from his book on the problem of Kairotic time, and nevertheless, the issue of vitality affects from his last book. By going through these three steps of Stern's thought, I will be trying to prove that we can as well think of a process of humanization, but in Sternian terms, not necessarily in the paradigm of Winnicott. I wanted to propose a Sternian account of the process of humanization, because I find the theories of certain canonical phenomenological authors more compatible with the works of Daniel Stern rather than with those of Winnicott. Moreover, by virtue of the certain recent developments from child psychology, as in the works of Stern and Trevarthen, one might rethink the process of humanization from a new and fresh perspective. This task is a difficult one, mostly because of the speculative character of this inquiry. Here we can remember Husserl's phrase that the child is a very delicate and special case for the study of the phenomenologist, and maybe this is the reason why Husserl never dedicated that many pages to the study of the phenomenology of the child's life.³ Heidegger did not concern himself that much with the problem of the phenomenology of the child's life, despite some brief remarks from the *Zollikon Seminars*.⁴ However, Merleau-Ponty held courses on the psychology of the child at Sorbonne, applying phenomenological concepts upon those theories.⁵ Eugen Fink's theories about play might be used in the case of the psychology of the child,⁶ but as I have stated in the beginning, Richirian concepts are more suitable for a talk vis-à-vis Daniel Stern's paradigm, mostly because of Richir's use of the Kantian notion of the sublime. Finally, I hope that I can shed some light on the issue of humanization, drawing mostly on phenomenology and psychoanalysis. I also want

³ Edmund Husserl, *Husserliana Band XV: Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität: Dritter Teil* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 604.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars: Protocols-Conversations-Letters* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 321.

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures 1949-1952* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 241.

⁶ Eugen Fink, *Play as Symbol of the World* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016), 227.

to state from the beginning that the phrase “process of humanization” does not mean that the infant is less human than the grown-up, but that the mother, the father, the caregiver, or the other in general has the role of transferring his or her humanity to the child, so that the infant could be introduced to the social, historical and cultural sphere.

This paper will be divided as follows: 1) Affect Attunement; 2) Moments of meeting; 3) Vitality affect; 4) Phenomenological remarks on Stern’s process of humanization and nonetheless 5) By way of conclusion: It was about music all along.

Affect attunement

I am going to start this inquiry with the issue of affect attunement. I am not going to talk about Stern’s theory of the senses of self, rather, my focus will be implicitly applied upon the thematization of affectivity.

For Stern, the sharing of affective states is the most pervasive feature of intersubjective relatedness. This statement is especially true when one discusses about the life of the infant. Stern goes on coining the term interaffectivity, so that he might start to build his conceptual basis of the following discussion. Interaffectivity involves mirroring and emphatic responsiveness. The issue of affect attunement must be situated, according to Stern, under the threshold of language, so there he speaks about children between nine and fifteen months old.⁷

Stern’s account lies mainly in his focus on the experiential level. Therefore, he will argue that in order that affective states are shared, mere imitation is not enough. For affect attunement to take place, numerous behaviours have to be taken into account. First, the parent must be able to read the infant’s feelings from his/her overt behaviour. Secondly, the parent does not need to imitate the infant, but instead he/she needs to perform a behaviour that matches the infant’s feeling state. Thirdly, and maybe most importantly, the child must be able to read the parent’s behaviour as having to do with his/her feeling state, be that a gesture/vocalization/movement and so on.⁸

Here Stern advises us to take the example of a social dialogue or proto-dialogue between mother and infant, which is not yet affect attunement. The infant vocalizes, and the mother vocalizes back. The infant makes a face, and the mother makes a face too. The dialogue must not remain a stereotypic boring sequence of repeats, and here the mother’s part is crucial, because she must constantly introduce modifying imitations or provide a theme-and-variation format with slight changes in her contribution at each dialogic turn. This might be a narrow, but certain path towards affect attunement.⁹

To understand affect attunement, Stern gives the example of a child playing with a rattle, and the mother vocalizing back something like: “Yes! That a boy/girl!”. This match

⁷ Daniel N. Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (London: Karnac Books, 1998), 138.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 140.

between the infant's gesture or movement and between the mother's vocalization is largely cross-modal, namely it involves different modalities of behaviours. In our example, the child's gesture/movement is matched in intensity and duration by the mother's vocalization. The fundamental point which Stern tries to make is that what is matched is not the other person's behavior per se, but rather some aspect of the behaviour that reflects the person's feeling state.¹⁰

Affect attunement is then the performance of behaviours that express the quality of feeling of a shared affective state without imitating the exact behavioural expression of the inner state, whereas if there was mere imitation, our affective responses would have looked robot-like. The reason why affect attunement is so important as a distinct phenomenon than mere imitation is that imitation does not permit the partners to refer to the internal state of each other. Moreover, it maintains the focus of attention upon the forms of the external behaviours. Attunement behaviours recast the event and shift the focus of attention on that which is behind the behaviour, namely to the quality of feeling that is being shared. Imitation becomes then the predominant way to teach external forms, whereas attunement becomes the royal path towards sharing internal states. Imitation renders form, whereas attunement renders feeling. Lastly, Stern does not contrast attunement with imitation, rather, he sees them as two ends of the same spectrum.¹¹

Stern mentions, among alternative conceptualizations, Trevarthen's theory of intersubjectivity, claiming that it concerns the mutual sharing of psychic states, referring mostly to intentions and motives. These behaviours are not involving feelings or affects that much, Stern argues. Stern suggests that the problem with Trevarthen's theory is that he places far greater emphasis on interintentionality rather than on interaffectivity. Intersubjectivity becomes then an adequate term, but too inclusive for Stern's purposes. Affect attunement is a unique fort of intersubjectivity.¹²

Mirroring and echoing come closest to affect attunement, following Stern's perspective. Mirroring has the disadvantage of suggesting complete temporal synchrony, while echoing avoids the temporal constraint. Both of them represent attempts at reflecting the other's inner state, and they have the advantage of being concerned with the subjective state rather than with the manifest behaviour. Nevertheless, reflecting plays a great role in the psychoanalytical theories of Mahler, Kohut or Lacan, because by reflecting the infant's feeling state, the child is developing knowledge of his/her own affectivity and sense of self.¹³

Stern then analyses the nature of empathy, insisting that it must be differentiated from affect attunement. Empathy involves the resonance of feeling state, the abstraction of emphatic knowledge from the experience of emotional resonance, the integration of abstracted emphatic knowledge into an emphatic response and, finally, a transient role

¹⁰ Ibid., 141.

¹¹ Ibid., 142.

¹² Ibid., 144.

¹³ Ibid., 144.

identification. Affect attunement shares with empathy the process of emotional resonance, but affect attunement also takes the experience of emotional resonance and automatically recasts that experience into another form of expression. Therefore, Stern concludes that attunement does not need to proceed towards empathic knowledge or response. Attunement is a distinct form of affective transaction.¹⁴

A question is then raised, namely what are the characteristics that make affect attunement differ from mere imitation? Stern identifies the intensity feature, timing, and shape. These three elements are then broken down into six specific components, these being absolute intensity, intensity contour, temporal beat, rhythm, duration, and shape.¹⁵

For attunement to work, different behavioural expressions occurring in different forms and in different sensory modalities must somehow be interchangeable. If the mother's gesture is to correspond to the infant's vocalization, for example, these two expressions must share some common currency that permits them to be transferred from one modality to another. The common currency of which Stern is talking about are exactly the amodal properties. These include intensity, shape, time, motion, and number. The qualities of experience that lend themselves to intermodal fluency are the ones that were determined to be the best criteria for attunement, namely intensity, time, and shape.¹⁶

Stern explains the issue concerning the vitality feature of affect attunements, a feature which I am going to use in later discussion. For now, I just want to add, following Stern, that vitality is ideally suited to be the subject of attunements, because it is composed of the amodal qualities of intensity and time, and these provide a continuously present (though changing) subject for attunement. These vitality affects permit one to be with another in the sense of sharing inner experiences. This is exactly the feeling of connectedness (of being in attunement with another), of which Stern was stressing a lot in his thematization.¹⁷

Moments of meeting

I am going to call "moments of meeting", the moments which Stern has named under the title of "now moments", "present moments" etc. The reason why I wish to call all of these "moments of meeting" is because of their dialogical meaning and value which I am going to explore from now on. Moreover, whereas "now moments" or "present moments" might occur for the individual person, moments of meeting involve the dialogical relation between *I and Thou*.¹⁸ I consider Stern's description of such moments to be illustrative and paradigmatic even for moments of meetings. For Stern, as for many philosophers, the distinction between *Chronos* and *Kairos* seems to involve necessary conceptual clarifications. To accomplish this

¹⁴ Ibid., 145.

¹⁵ Ibid., 146.

¹⁶ Ibid., 152.

¹⁷ Ibid., 157.

¹⁸ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 5.

task, I am going explain in a few words what *Kairos* brings new to the concept of time. *Kairos* is the passing moment in which something happens as the time unfolds. It is a coming into being of a new state of things, and also, a moment of awareness and opportunity.¹⁹ Many philosophers have used the concept of *Kairos* to build up their argumentation of a specific theory, and here Plato, Kierkegaard and Heidegger might be evoked.

Despite that they last only a few seconds, moments of meeting are intensively rich in content, even in the affective field. Moments of meeting occupy the subjective now, whereas *Chronos* might rather be associated with objective time. The moment is a whole happening, a gestalt, which involves awareness.²⁰ The moment of meeting that happens between two persons involves vitality affects. Moreover, by virtue of these moments of meeting between *I and Thou*, a lived story unfolds.²¹ The moment of meeting might be imagined as being situated in some kind of equilibrium between the past and the future. It must be anchored in both temporal dimensions.²²

In the abovementioned paragraph I have already stated that the moments of meeting involve awareness. Furthermore, these moments of meeting do not involve any verbal account of an experience. I could also point towards the intensity of this experience because these moments being very short bits of lived experience trigger somehow the awareness of the people involved in that particular encounter.²³

A key point in our discussion is that moments of meeting present a psychological function, namely a subjective experience must be sufficiently novel or problematic to enter consciousness, and even awareness. Moments of meeting are holistic happenings, and the question whether we can grasp the wholeness of the other or not in a moment of meeting will be left aside for further research. Moments of meeting are also temporarily dynamic.²⁴ Likewise in Martin Buber's commitment towards an *I-Thou relationship*,²⁵ the moment of meeting is partially unpredictable. Very important for our discussion is that these moments involve some sense of self, and this quest for the self might be linked again with the issue of awareness. To live is to be addressed,²⁶ writes Martin Buber, whereas Stern insists that a moment of meeting involves some sort of action, namely a stance towards that happening, such in the experience of *Kairos*. Different moments serve different functions.²⁷

¹⁹ Daniel N. Stern, *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life* (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

²² *Ibid.*, 28.

²³ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁵ Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), 82.

²⁶ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), 12.

²⁷ Stern, *The Present Moment*, 39.

The quest for vitality affects

Now I am going to turn towards the question of dynamic forms of vitality, this being our third element in the process of humanization, namely the vitality component. As the moment of meeting, vitality is a whole, a Gestalt that emerges from the theoretically separate experiences of movement, force, time, space, and intention.²⁸

Daniel Stern even composes a list of what might be called vitality affects, and in that list we find verbs such as exploding, surging, accelerating etc.²⁹ The connection of vitality affects and moments of meeting is made even more evident when Stern states that these dynamic forms (of vitality) are part of episodic memories and give life to the narratives we create about our lives.³⁰ Vitality dynamics are crucial for fitting an organism in its environment that it encounters.³¹

Vitality forms are associated with a content. They give a temporal and intensity contour to the content, and with it a sense of an alive “performance”. This is what gives the feel of being human, namely of flowing aliveness.³²

Stern very clearly links the dynamic forms of vitality with affect attunement. If these two processes are combined there is established a sense of mutual understanding between *I and Thou*. We must remember, that in the case of affect attunement, the match has to do with internal feeling states, and not with the overt behaviours. Therefore, affect attunement is based on matching and sharing dynamic forms of vitality (moments of meeting being the mediator), but across different modalities.³³

Phenomenological remarks on the process of humanization

I will now move towards the phenomenological remarks which will be applied onto Daniel Stern’s theories. These brief remarks will concern the perspectives of Edmund Husserl, Paul Ricoeur, Marc Richir (who draws himself on the Kant theory of the sublime) and Joonas Taipale (whose theory reminds us of certain Buberian echoes).

I have so far analysed Stern’s conception of affectivity, awareness and vitality, elements of which we are going to see that they have the role of humanizing the child by awaking him/her to the world. Moreover, these elements also awake the ethical component of the self, via what I wish to call the *interhuman sublime*. Furthermore, these elements involve the way in which music is embedded in our behaviours, but also the creation of narratives.

²⁸ Daniel N. Stern, *Forms of Vitality: Exploring Dynamic Experience in Psychology, the Arts, Psychotherapy, and Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

³² *Ibid.*, 23.

³³ *Ibid.*, 42.

Let me make now a few remarks concerning Richir's analysis of the relationship between mother and infant. In the case of this relation, Richir invokes the concept of the moment of the sublime. I would rather prefer to call this interpersonal triggering of affectivity, the *interhuman sublime*. In Husserl's theory of the phenomenology of the child's life, he stresses a lot the issue of awakening, because he considers that the infant continually awakens, simultaneously with the act of filling a world-horizon.³⁴ Moreover, this *interhuman sublime* plays the role of awaking the infant, by virtue of what Richir has called the *hyper-condensation of affectivity*,³⁵ followed by the *excess of affectivity*. This moment of the sublime is very similar to the Sternian moment of meeting, because in both phenomena, the infant has a blinking of what is like to be aware of oneself and of the situation in which he/she finds himself/herself. Moreover, it enables the infant to feel that he/she is not alone in that situation, in which the caregiver also participates. Furthermore, as we know from Kant's theory, which is to be found in the *Third Critique*,³⁶ but also in his *Anthropology*,³⁷ the sublime triggers the dimension of respect, so the ethical dimension of the human being. This would be a peculiar element of the process of humanization, because the child's awakening to the world becomes simultaneous with the child's awakening to his/her moral self.

I will move towards some observations coming from the direction of Ricoeur's theory of the narrative self. As we know, time because human time by means of the narrative function.³⁸ Let me now add also an observation coming from Vygotsky. The Russian psychologist considers that relationships with the others are internalized or introjected by the infant and they become higher psychological functions.³⁹ The suggestion which I want to propose concerns the way in which the child begins to develop an autobiographical self, and I consider that this possibility is due to the internalization of relationships, which become higher mental functions, but narratives. Nevertheless, certain authors stressed the importance of narrative identity for the development of the child's self or identity. Here I could mention Beatriz Priel's article on Winnicott and the intersubjective construction of time.⁴⁰

Returning to Stern's three elements of the process of humanization, we must remember that affect attunement is the affective dimension, the moments of meeting are the dimension of awareness, and the dynamic forms of vitality are of course, the vital function. If

³⁴ Husserl, *Husserliana Band XV*, 604.

³⁵ Cristian Bodea, "Symbolic Institution of Language in Speech on the Grounds of Phenomenological Freedom. An Inquire into Non Symbolic Phenomenology of Marc Richir", *Studia UBB. Philosophia* 59, no. 3 (2014): 59.

³⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 75.

³⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 140.

³⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative: Volume I* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 52.

³⁹ Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (London & Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012), Foreword XX.

⁴⁰ Beatriz Priel, "Time and Self: On the Intersubjective Construction of Time", *Psychoanalytic Dialogues: The International Journal of Relational Perspectives* 7:4 (1997): 431.

these good-enough interactions between mother and infant take place, then the child will start to have a sort of self-understanding and an understanding of the other, even a relational understanding concerning the situation in which he/she finds himself/herself. Moreover, following Joona Taipale's argumentation, in the case of affect attunement, the mirroring function might even represent the forerunner of the capacity for reflexive distance, namely the way in which the infant takes a third-person perspective towards himself/herself.⁴¹

By way of conclusion: It was about music all along

I want to conclude by stating that music was implicitly present all along during our discussion, even though it was not actually mentioned as such. Now I want to explain why this is so, and simultaneously, I will try to prove that musicality is embedded in the Sternian version of the humanization process. I could just recall affect attunement for example, and all of its specific temporal features, which somehow build up a process similar to Schutz's mutual tuning-in relationship from his text *Making Music Together*.⁴² Even though Schutz was stressing the temporal dimension of this communication process, Stern emphasized more the affective dimension. Nevertheless, despite their different methods, they arrived at similar conclusions. Secondly, during moments of meeting, we come to grasp otherness similar to the way in which we grasp a piece of music, namely in its totality, as Taipale was pointing out.⁴³ Thirdly, music is a vital phenomenon, which involves all the components on which vitality dynamics are build on. Therefore, perhaps in another research, I will be moving towards the musical process of humanization, but this time in Trevarthen's terms. I could as well try to discuss the process in which narratives give rise to awareness, necessary for the process of humanization. As we saw during our argumentation, music and narratives are present since the earliest moments of the infant's life.

Even though musicality is a pervasive feature of our behaviours, it becomes even more important in the case of early mother-infant interactions. Therefore, Daniel Stern, alongside Marc Richir have proved once again that the process of humanization is an utterly relational one, involving that the other is present almost all the time in these early interactions. Recapitulating our assertions, affect attunement becomes the way in which the infant comes to acknowledge that he/she dwells among other human beings, which reciprocate with him/her, by way of playful human interactions. Moreover, moments of meeting involve co-awareness between mother and infant and even a sense of agency, because of the participation of both in this relational event. Finally, vitality affects or dynamic forms of vitality become the process by which *I and Thou* come to read the inner state of each other, establishing a harmony between the two of them, which could also be called a relational rhythm.

⁴¹ Joona Taipale, "Self-regulation and Beyond: Affect Regulation and the Infant-Caregiver Dyad", *Frontiers in Psychology* 7:889 (June 2016): 4.

⁴² Alfred Schutz, *Collected Papers II: Studies in Social Theory* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 159.

⁴³ Joona Taipale, "Empathy and the Melodic Unity of the Other", *Human Studies* 38 (September 2015): 476.