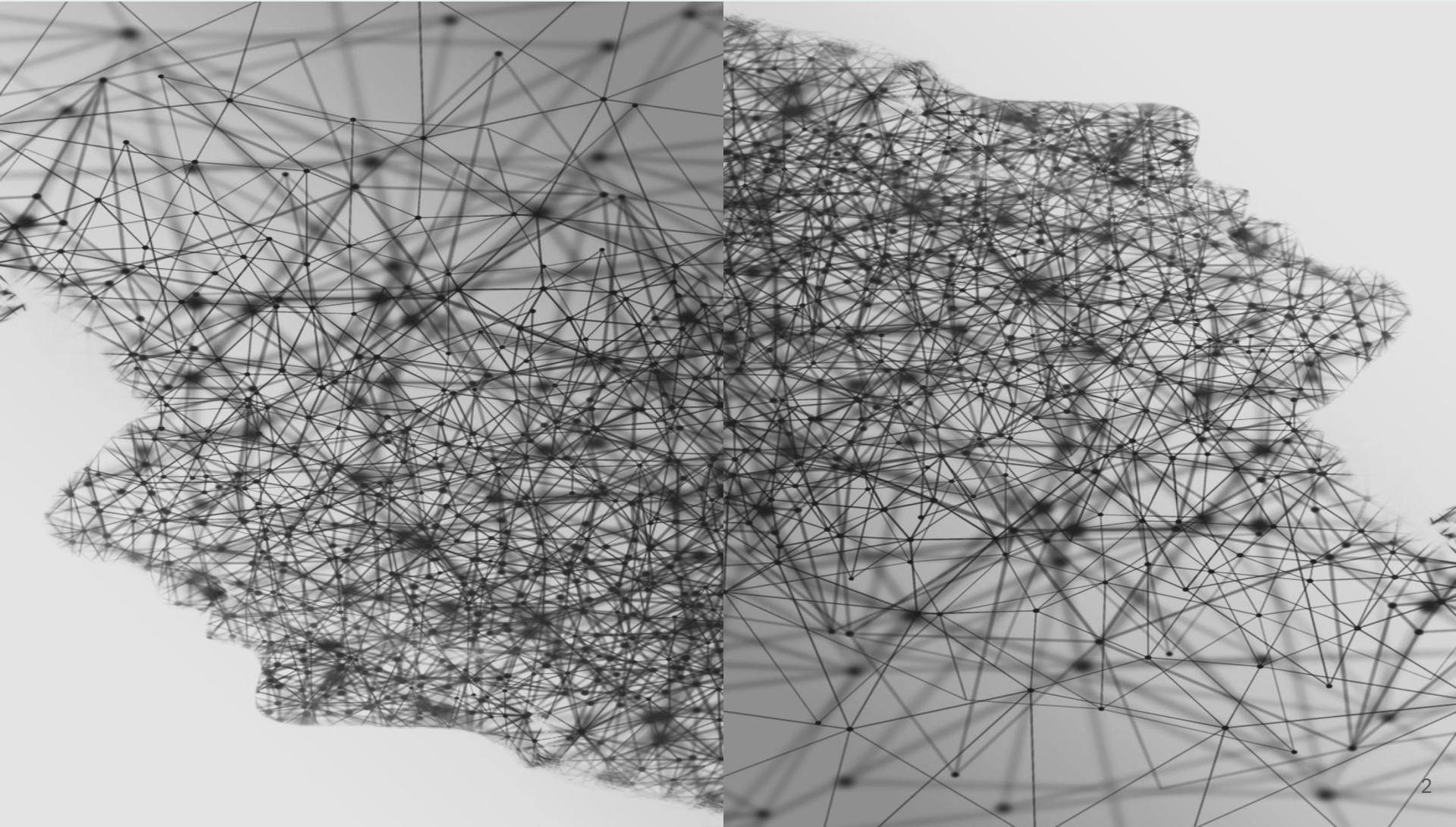




# Group Flow As Spontaneous Collective Agency: A Phenomenological Account

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# What is it like to act as one?



# What Is Group Flow?

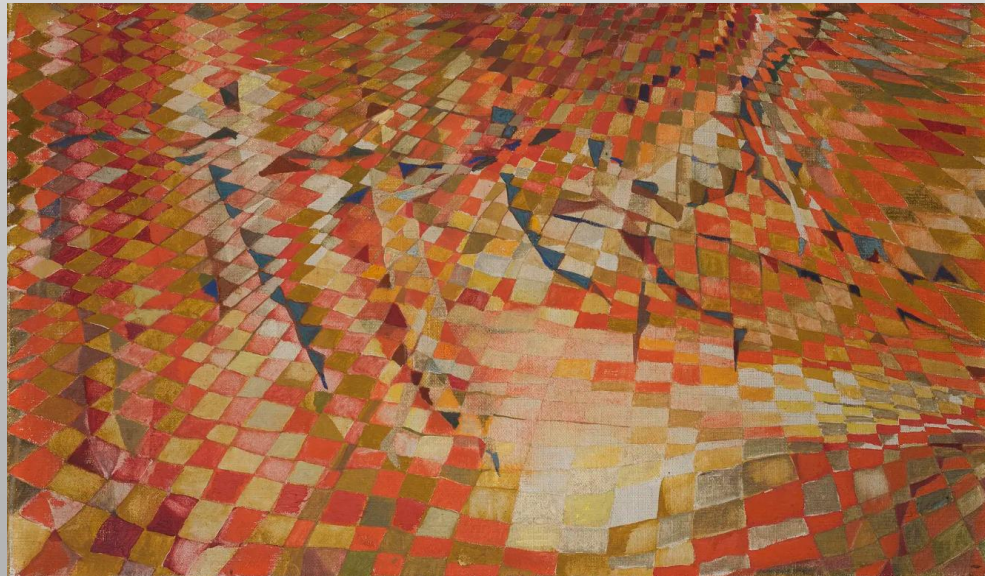
A shared experience of **absorption** in a **spontaneous, effortless, autotelic** action (i.e. action experienced as its own reward) that is sustained by acting in unison with other agents.

Individuals experience enhanced efficacy through sustained interaction with others and a merger of self and others, leading to shared ownership of action.



## Group Flow: Hackert et. al. (2023)

- Improvisers report a shift, as the performance unfolds, from individually experiencing flow in parallel to a sense of shared ownership of action
- An intensified sense of efficacy in action is attributed to the social process as a whole rather than the individual agents



Painting By:  
Da Silva – *Ballet Figure*



## Group Flow: Hackert et. al. (2023)

“Group flow [...] refers to an emergent state of groups that has *no equivalent* on the individual level.” (Hackert et. al., 106)

At the group level “the flow state is defined by the actions of one person following seamlessly from the actions of another person, *on a level that is distinctly beyond that of any single group member.*” (Ibid, 101)

# Why Is Group Flow Philosophically Significant?

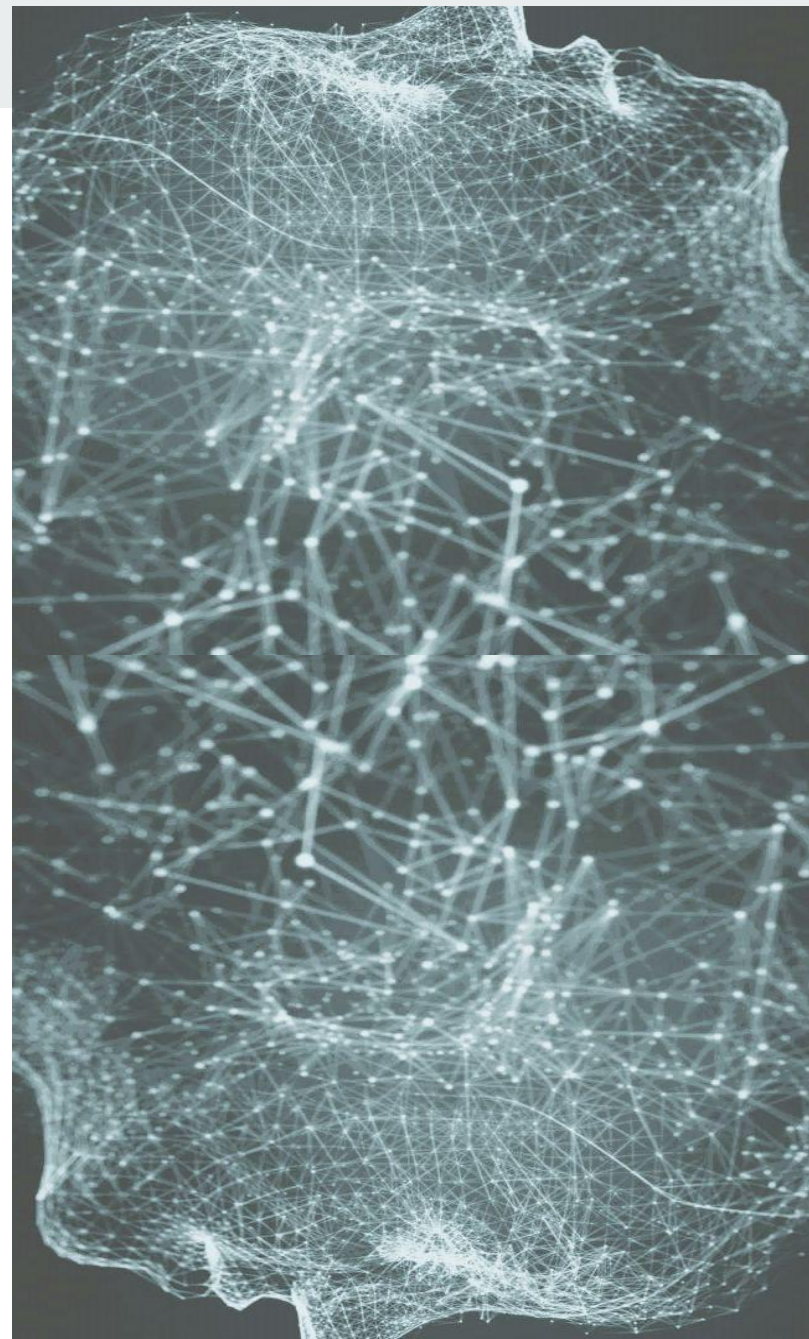
- Group flow depends on interactional dynamics *between* agents, *not* on psychological states *internal* to agents.
- It is an experience in which the source of one's agency is a sense of *oneness* rather than *autonomy*.
- The individual agent is no longer experienced as the main driver of the action; the group is.

## The Puzzle of Group Flow

- A sense of *intensified* agency and efficacy coupled with *diminished* individual ownership and *heightened* shared ownership of action.
- What must the agent be to experience intertwining with others as a source of intensified agency?
- Which experiential structures make possible the alteration in agents' sense of authorship of their actions which gives rise to a sense of shared ownership?

## My Goal

Present a phenomenological account that explains the puzzling features of this phenomenon.



# Two Intertwined Levels of Intentionality in Action in Unison

Per Thomas Szanto, the most basic form of WE-experience evinces:

1. **Plurality:** Shared experiences are comprised of a plurality of intentionally-intertwined individuals. They are made possible by an alteration in each participating individual's sense of agency.
1. **Integrity:** Collective agents are more than an aggregate of individuals insofar as they exhibit an intentional unification that gives rise to a supra-individual point of view.



## Why the Psychological Account Fails to Address the Puzzle

1. It fails to satisfy the **Plurality** criterion:

It gives no description of how self-experience is *altered* by participating in the experience of acting in unison.



## Why the Psychological Account Fails to Address the Puzzle

2. It fails to satisfy the **Integrity** criterion:

It mistakes intentional unification that preserves identity-within-difference for a simple individuality-effacing mereological fusion.



## Why the Psychological Account Fails to Solve the Puzzle of Group Flow

If no self-consciousness were present in group flow...

There would be *no one* to feel *their own* sense of agency intensified in group flow!

Group flow is precisely a sense of diminished *individual* ownership of the action coupled with a heightened sense of shared ownership of action.

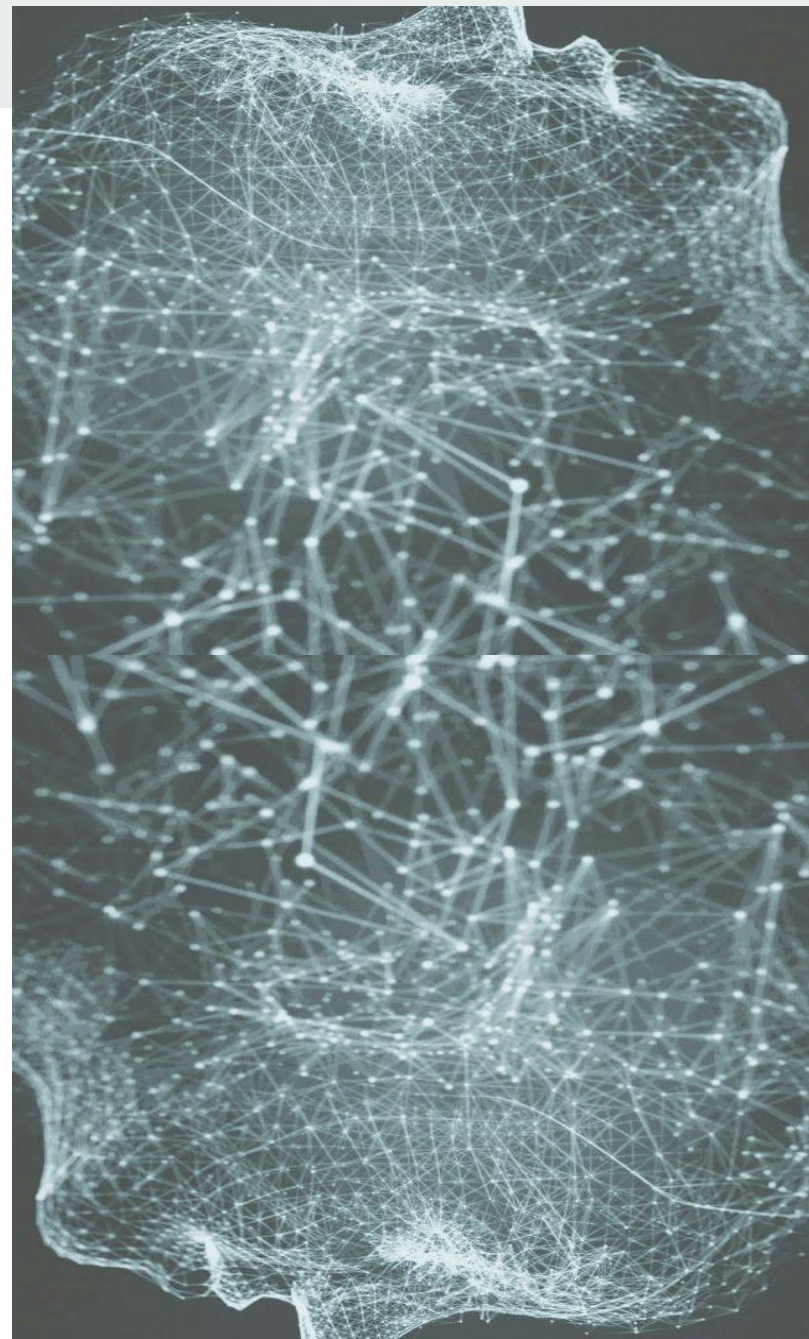
# A Phenomenological Solution to the Puzzle of Group Flow

- The puzzle arises because of intentional structures the psychological description is not designed to track.
- **The solution:** A phenomenological description of the level of intentionality at which our sense of self and of the other co-arises.
- It is an alteration at this level of our intentional lives that can explain how oneness with others can be experienced as an intensification of our sense of agency.

## So What Makes Action in Unison in Group Flow Possible?

The intentional unification that makes possible action in unison is founded on the level of bodily self-experience and intentionality Merleau-Ponty called:

**Chiasm.**



## Chiasm Is:

- The fundamental dimension of bodily intentionality that makes possible the sense of individual agency and the capacity for action in unison.
- An invariant dimension of all experience which consists of the primordial intertwining of bodily subjectivity and the world as the ultimate context of action.
- Experience as a reciprocal interaction between bodily subjectivity and the world:
  - E.g.: My bodily awareness of *holding* an object is simultaneously a bodily awareness of *being held* by the world.

# Chiasm As the “Underside” of Self-Experience and Agency

- It is constituted by the intentionality of pre-personal, sensorimotor processes that make possible a pre-egoic awareness of the possible reach of one’s capacity for movement, thus supplying the infrastructure for personal action.
- It precedes the experiential arising of the distinction between activity and receptivity.
- In virtue of this permanent substratum of our intentional lives, all agency *affects itself* while being *affected by the world*.

# Chiasm as the Condition of Action in Unison

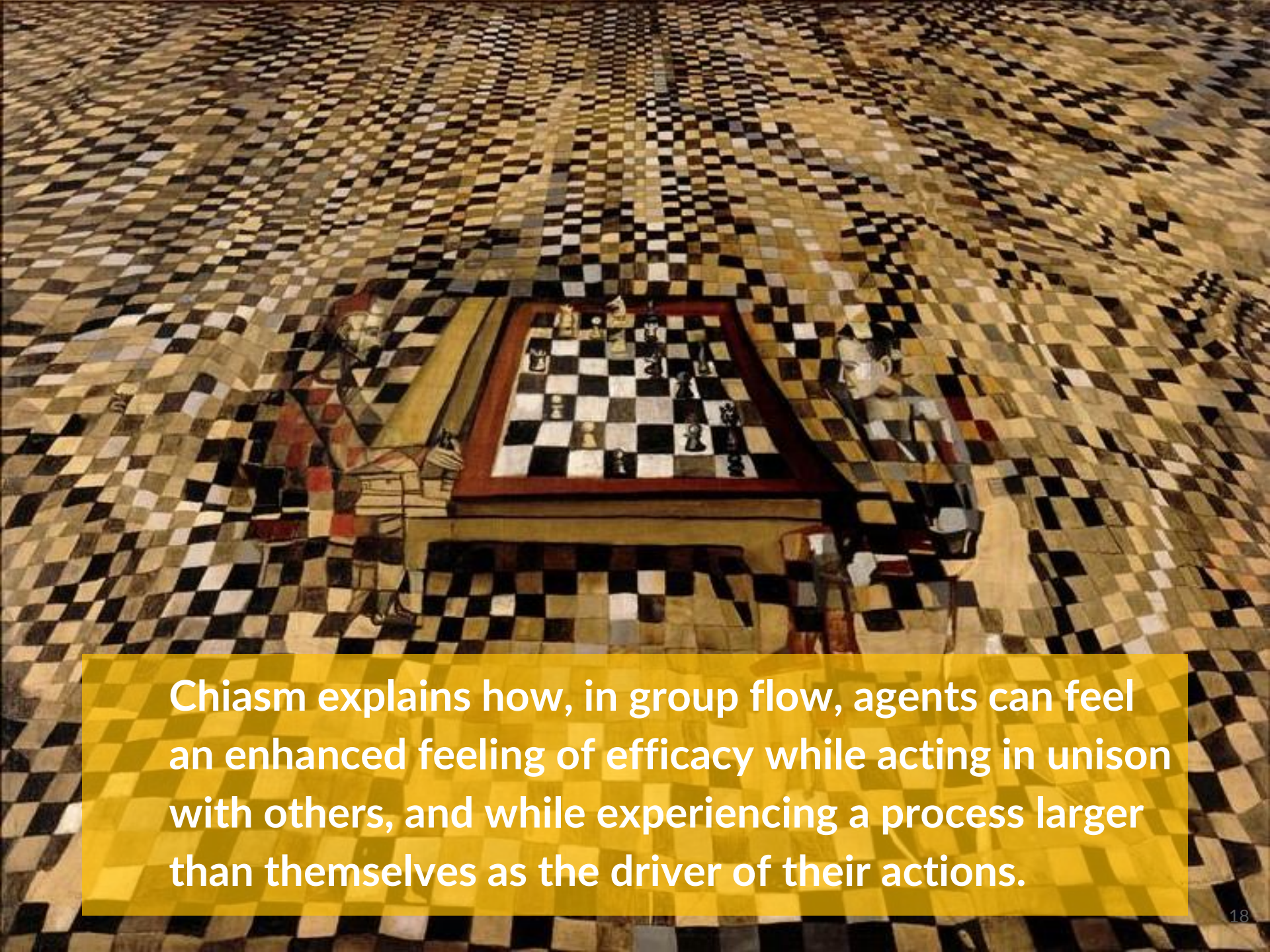


In virtue of chiasm, we are aware of our actions as disclosing a shared action situation and a shared horizon of possibility.

Thus, chiasm makes possible the experiential arising of a feeling of intentional intertwinement with others when acting in unison.



*^Bodily intertwinement*



Chiasm explains how, in group flow, agents can feel an enhanced feeling of efficacy while acting in unison with others, and while experiencing a process larger than themselves as the driver of their actions.

# Collective Agents

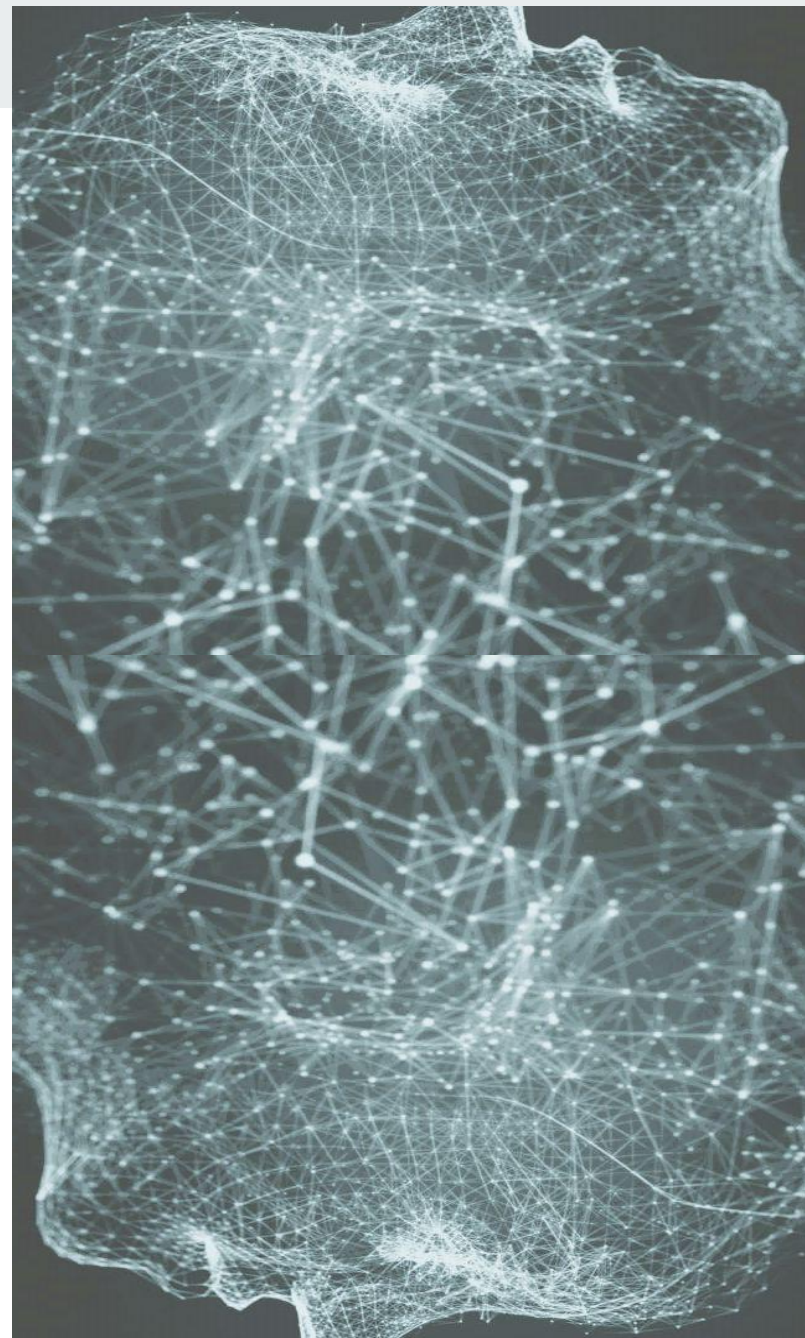
- These are collective unities formed through the intertwinement of the experiential **horizons** of interacting individuals.
- They are qualitatively describable in their own right.

E.g.: A symphony orchestra or a philosophical community of minds spontaneously arising over the course of a conversation

# What Makes Possible the Shift From “I Act” to “We Act”?

## Enfoldment:

- a supra-individual intentional structure formed through the transient intentional intertwining of interacting bodily subjects.
- Enfoldment is an intersubjective *constraint* on interactants' sense of possible action and on possible interactional dynamics.



## Enfoldment:

- Establishes makes possible a shared time of thought, feeling, and action;
- Arises in the context of reciprocal interactions in spontaneous action in which there is a high level of synchronization between interactants;
- Is individually anchored, experientially, in the chiasmic structure of bodily intentionality;
- As the intersubjective structured context formed by interacting bodily intentionalities, it constitutes a shared horizon of possible action, thereby providing the starting point for further action.

## Individuals Are Aware of Being Enfolded Insofar As They Are Aware Of:

1. Oneness with others and participation in a social process as drivers of their action;
2. Their sense of inner time subsumed to the tempo of a shared time;
3. A motivation to act for the sake of contributing to the continuance of a quality that individuates that encompassing process as a unitary, supra-individual structure.
4. A shared *optimum* to which the collective action tends.

## Individuals Are Aware of Being Enfolded Insofar As They Are Aware Of:

5. Being oriented in a shared horizon of action possibilities.
6. Shared “meaning implicates:” culturally inherited patterns of gesture, synchronized movement and action;
7. Depending on others for the complete fulfillment of one’s action intentions.

# Enfoldment As the Ground of the Experiential Arising of A Shared Time

The enfoldment of chiasmic bodily agents gives rise to a self-unifying collective structure in which individuals progressively depend on one another for the fulfillment of their action intentions.



## Phenomenologically Dissolving the Puzzle of Group Flow

The interrelation of enfoldment and chiasm makes it possible for agents to experience an intensification of their sense of agency coupled with diminished authorship of action and heightened sense of oneness with others.



## Conclusion

Group flow is an experience in which a sense of oneness with others is motivationally efficacious.

The phenomenological redescription of group flow leads us to rethink what it is to be an agent by providing a deeper understanding of the experiential structures that make possible the interrelation of individual- and collective-agency.