

Comments on Celine Geday's
"Empirical and Epistemological Implications of an Enactive Sensorimotor Contingency Theory"
By Kristoffer Moody

The way I'll structure this commentary is by first showing what is at stake, secondly, summarizing the essay, and thirdly asking for a point of clarification, and offering an objection.

First, what's at stake? There are two relationships here which are in opposition. The first is whether or not perception ought to be best understood under the rubric of representationalism, which is the idea that our phenomenological awareness is constituted by internal mental representations. This view is in opposition to enactivism, which is the idea that our phenomenological awareness is constituted by the dynamic interaction between our perception and the world itself.

The second oppositional relationship is between two forms of enactivism: on the one hand, O'Regan and Noe's enactive sensorimotor contingency theory (I will abbreviate this hereafter as SCT), and on the other, Hutto's radical enactivism. I will talk a bit more about this oppositional relationship later, but for now I will try to summarize the essay.

The essay begins by demonstrating the value of enactivism as opposed to representationalism: enactivism is able to solve the explanatory gap for consciousness by reconciling the phenomenological "feeling" of consciousness with a scientific understanding of how the mind actually works. It does this by substituting the notion that phenomenological consciousness occurs as a result of a particular brain-state, and thus that there ought to be a particular neural correlate of consciousness (which we have not been able to find), with the suggestion that instead consciousness is constituted by the dynamic interactions between the brain and its environment.

This suggestion is supported by empirical evidence on change blindness, which shows that we are only phenomenologically aware of what we directly attend to in a particular visual scene; thus, it seems, our awareness is constituted by our dynamic interactions with the environment, rather than by an internal mental representation.

The first objection to SCT concerns how the theory can be supported under a functionalist standpoint given the phenomenon of synesthesia. In the interests of brevity, I will not try to summarize this objection, nor the way with which it is resolved.

The other objection mentioned in the essay is made by Hutto. Hutto believes that O'Regan and Noe are misguided in their formulation of enactivism, SCT. This is because their theory describes the perceiver as interacting with the world on the basis of perceptual inputs which are modulated by mastery over

particular sensorimotor contingencies, i.e., internal mental laws which define how the perceiver will perceive a particular percept. The problem, Hutto claims, is that this seems to assume that the perceiver has certain propositional knowledge, i.e., the knowledge of those laws, which is removed from her dynamic interaction with the world. The perceiver, then, seems to have discrete internal knowledge, and the theory, Hutto claims, falls back onto representationalism. Hutto's solution, radical enactivism, is to posit that there is no discrete internal knowledge required for conscious experience. Conscious experience, according to Hutto, requires only the situation of the active perceiver in an environment, but not any particular knowledge or skill on the part of the perceiver.

The rest of the essay is spent defending O'Regan and Noe's SCT against Hutto's radical enactivism. This is done by situating enactivism within the context of earlier research by Varela et al on embodied cognition. Their embodied cognition research, which was inspired by the Buddhist notions of mindfulness and selflessness, has value insofar as it purports to promote "liberating transformation in the natural and social sciences" and diminishes "nihilistic and absolutist views in empirical research." The suggestion is that O'Regan and Noe's theory is exactly compatible with Varela et al., and that there are thus the earlier enumerated positive epistemological implications for pursuing that theory, as opposed to Hutto's.

OK. Now the third part of my commentary. I have a question and an objection.

First, my question. The essay says that "enactivism's central claims may be fallible to rational evaluation, but have pragmatic value." I take it, given the context of the quote, that this is a defense of SCT, as opposed to radical enactivism. I'm curious as to what the value might be, if the theory is objectively false. Is it something along the lines of the value which we, hypothetically, might ascribe to the theory that we have free will for the purpose of research programs into, e.g., morality, despite rationally understanding that we do not, in fact, have free will? Is the value of SCT merely, then, as a convenient falsehood which would have instrumental value in supporting, for instance, the otherwise unsupported supposition that there is neither a single transcendent truth in empirical research nor no truth at all?

Second, my objection. It seems to me that Hutto's radical enactivism more closely approximates a Buddhist understanding of the true nature of consciousness than does O'Regan and Noe's SCT. Given that much of the pragmatic benefit of pursuing enactivism of any variety is purported to be because of the epistemological implications of a *Buddhist* world view being applied to the natural and social sciences, it seems to me that the type of enactivism which more closely fits that world view would have the greater chance of enacting (as it were) those implications.

So, why do I think that radical enactivism fits more closely to a Buddhist world-view than does SCT? Fundamentally, it's because radical enactivism seems to me to more fully apply the central concept within Buddhism; that central concept is "anatman", or "no-self". The idea behind anatman is that no thing can exist in- and by-itself, as each thing is completely empty of its own discrete content. Rather, any given thing exists and has content only as a result of its mutual interdependence with every other thing. The reality of this idea is demonstrated by a Buddhist parable in which a man sees each part of his body gruesomely consumed by demons, and replaced by the body parts of a dead man. After experiencing this horror, the man describes what has happened to him to a Buddhist monk whom he happens upon. The monk explains that

Not just now, but from its beginning up until the present, your body has all along been devoid of a Self. It was only because of the coming together of the four basic elements that you thought, 'This is my body.' But there is no difference between your former body and that which you have today.²⁴²

Just as the perception of one's body as being a discrete entity with its own distinctive content, i.e., that it is "mine", is an illusion, so is, under Buddhism, the perception of one's mind as being a discrete entity an illusion. The reality of the mind is not in its discrete internal content (as it has none), but is instead in its relationship with other things, and in its situation in the world. Of the two types of enactivism, this seems to me to fit Hutto's radical enactivism more than SCT. This is because radical enactivism proposes a content-less mind, at least within the realm of perceptual consciousness, while SCT supposes that the mind must have at least some internal content in order to be able to perceive.

242 "The Man Who Lost His Body." *The Experience of Buddhism*. Ed. John Strong. Belmont: Wadsworth, 1995. 99. Print.