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“Enactive Perception” in the Eyes of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty

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Phenomenology is not dead yet, at least not from the viewpoint of the “phenomenology-friendly”¹ approach that has recently emerged in cognitive science: the “enactive approach” to the mind or “enactivism.”² In this approach, the mental capacities, such as perception, consciousness and cognition, do not emerge only as a result of brain activities, like in the reductionist explanation of the mental, known as cognitivism, especially computationalism.³ Rather, the mental capacities emerge as a result of the interaction between the brain, the body and the environment, where the mind “enacts” its own world.⁴ What makes this approach so fruitful for a renewed philosophical consideration is its ongoing reference to Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenologies.⁵ It was declared to be “consistent with Husserl and Merleau-Ponty on virtually every point,” to be the “revival” of phenomenology, even a “Kuhnian revolution.”⁶ Evan Thompson, a proponent of the enactive theory, argues that this approach “uses phenomenology to explicate mind science and mind science to explicate phenomenology. Concepts such as lived body, organism, bodily selfhood and autonomous agency, the intentional arc and dynamic sensorimotor dependencies, can thus become mutually illuminating rather than merely correlational concepts.”⁷ The phenomenological works seem to strike a chord with the enactive theorists. Are we witnessing the dawn of “The new Science of the Mind”?⁸

As is often the case with proclamations of revivals and new approaches, there are those who contest them, arguing that the orientation of the enactive approach “have little in common” with phenomenology.⁹ What reinforces this stance is the fact that enactivism is part of a broader project of “naturalizing” phenomenology.¹⁰ The question that arises is: To what extent are the premises and conclusions of the enactive approach consistent with those of the phenomenological approach? The nexus of enactivism and phenomenology

is surely very wide, and not all of its aspects can be covered here. I will thus concentrate on the notion of “enactive perception,” mainly in Alva Noë’s *Action in Perception*, but also in others, and on its relation to some of Husserl’s ideas as well as to Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* and later ontology. Noë’s argument goes about the role of self-motion and sensorimotor knowledge in perceptual experience. Likewise, for Thompson, “to perceive is to exercise one’s skillful master of the ways sensory stimulation varies as a result of bodily movement.”¹¹ Does their approach to perception overlap in any way with that of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty?

In what follows I try to answer this question, starting with analyzing Noë’s concept of enactive perception as a physicalist attempt to overcome the challenge of representationalism with the help of empirical psychology. I then turn to Husserl’s phenomenology and the differences between its transcendental method and the enactive approach. I show that Noë’s solution of the Husserlian phenomenological problem of perception remains naturalistic, as it does not take the phenomenon of intersubjectivity and the constitution of a non-natural world, the “cultural world,” into account. Afterwards I turn to Merleau-Ponty and claim that there is some certain common ground with Noë, but also major differences. I conclude that the enactive approach is not completely refuted by the phenomenological one, insofar as the latter partly contains the first. Yet the enactive approach deals with the necessary conditions of perception qua animal perception, not with the sufficient conditions for the understanding of human perception. For this reason, enactivism and phenomenology are methodologically different projects: whereas enactivism makes do with the continuity of the axis brain-body-environment, phenomenology goes beyond it to discuss the philosophical issues that are typical to human consciousness, like the question of freedom and the inquiry into the social, linguistic, and historical circumstances under which the understanding of the human mind is made possible. The reason why the recent turn of phenomenology into neurophenomenology is perceived as a “revival” is virtually inherent to the specific scientific ethos of the enactive approach and reveals a certain oblivion of the objectives of philosophical phenomenology.

The Argument of Enactive Perception

The point of departure of Noë’s argument is the refutation of representationalism, as demonstrated in Dennett’s “Cartesian theater” and Ryle’s “ghost in the machine.”¹² He argues that perceptual experience does not amount to viewing pictures in the head. Against the physicalist internalism of John Searle who argues that all aspects of experience must have correlates in the neuronal reactions, because “mental states are both caused by the operations of the brain and realized in the structure of the brain,”¹³ Noë claims that perceptual experience does not emerge through mere

representations of objects in the brain, or, in other words, that neuronal activities and neuronal substrates are not sufficient for the determination of perception, because other physical substrates like head and eye movements as well as light conditions evidently play a constitutive role in perceptual experience. And so perception does not only happen in the head, it is rather a result of an interaction between our brain, our body, and the environment.¹⁴ In the process of perception “we enact our perceptual experience; we act it out,” and by performing our experience “we enact the environment”¹⁵ and put it literally into effect. In the enactive view, perception does not just happen to us, we do it, and therefore it is not only an “action guidance,” but an action itself, indeed a “thoughtful activity,” a “skillful activity” that can be learned and trained. Although perception is apparently informed by representations instanced in the brain, that is by “content-bearing internal states,” it is rather a “skillful activity on the part of the animal as a whole,”¹⁶ the performance of practical know-how knowledge.¹⁷ In short, Noë’s “active externalism” takes sensorimotor abilities to be that which conditions and constitutes perception.

Similarly, Thompson makes efforts to demonstrate the same, namely that the neural states of a perceptual experience should not be described at the level of “intrinsic neurophysiological properties,” for it is rather the case that “as a skillful activity of the whole animal or person, perceptual experience emerges from the continuous and reciprocal (non-linear) interactions of sensory, motor and cognitive processes, and is thereby constituted by motor behavior, sensory stimulation, and practical knowledge.”¹⁸ Note that animal and person are exchangeable here and undergo the same kind of process of perception, spatial perception of objects.

Noë’s “active externalism” rules out that perception can be understood as a passive ability like photographing, and consequently opposes the idea that perception is directly caused by the objects themselves, like in Peter Strawson’s causal theory of perception.¹⁹ Perception is not sensation caused by external stimulation in the model of stimulus-impression-perception in an input-output-system, for this would be a too mechanically shaped model. In a reaction against Hume’s and Newton’s physicalist theory of qualia, according to which colors and forms are physical properties or empirical dispositions of an object and cause a certain sensation in a normal perceiver, he explains perception not as subjective sensation, but as arising from the objective change of sensual stimuli as well as from the “knowledge” about this. Noë recognizes that such a sensationalist theory could not serve as an appropriate phenomenological explanation of perception, since colors are dispositions of objects only in relation to the change of their appearance under certain circumstances.²⁰

Only on the margin, Noë notes that “understanding” of sensual stimuli is necessary for perception, and since the basic form of understanding is a concept, perception is “conceptual” in the Kantian sense, that is, not an “explicit deliberative judge,”²¹ not something general independent of context,

but rather judgeable and intentional, “thoughtful,” “a way of thinking about the world.”²² Noë takes understanding by means of concepts to be a practical faculty, assuring that his thesis that perception is conceptually informed does not intend to over-intellectualize perception.²³

So far so good. Husserl and Merleau-Ponty would agree on a large scale with most of what is said above but, as I will show in the next sections, they claim much more than that. Let us begin with Husserl’s phenomenological analysis of perception.

Husserl’s Phenomenology and Enactive Perception

Husserl spent much of his lifetime to deal with questions of perception. Much of what the enactivists are saying about the role of self-motion in perception Husserl had already said in a lecture from 1907 called “Thing and Space,”²⁴ where he analyzes the role of kinesthesia for the constitution of objects and the constitution of space,²⁵ in his studies of *Phenomenological Psychology*²⁶ and in *Ideas II*, where he argues that both the visual field and the tactile field along with motion sensations play a major role in the act of perception. He also emphasizes the interaction between the living body (*Leib*) and the surrounding world (*Umwelt*). Perception, in its turn, plays a leading role in the constitution of “animal nature” and even its “psychic reality.”²⁷

However, this is only half of the story told in *Ideas II*. Noë’s story stops, precisely after two thirds of Husserl’s work, after section two “The Constitution of Animal Nature,” while not taking the next and last step into section three “The Constitution of the Spiritual World,” the world of persons. The differentiation begins where Husserl draws a precise distinction between the spiritual world, the world of a spirit (*Geist*) as a community of spirits, in which the human being is regarded as a person, a “social being,” connected with other persons, indeed not only as a natural individuality.²⁸ Husserl distinguishes between the “personalistic world,” the life-world of human beings, and the naturalistic world, the animal world. Each world is constituted upon its own specific “attitude” (*Einstellung*). At the final stage, Husserl unambiguously postulates the “ontological priority of the spiritual world over the naturalistic.”²⁹ Remember that Husserl intended his phenomenology to be an a priori descriptive science, a “rigorous science” (*strenge Wissenschaft*), a kind of meta-science for all sciences, ergo for the humanities too, and this against the psychologistic approach to the “empirical” origin of logical rules in the logic at his times and against the naturalistic conceived psyche in the psychology, again at his times.

So, given all that, there is perhaps not a sharp disagreement between Husserl and enactivism at first glance, but there is truly a major part that is completely missing in the enactive approach, a huge piece of thought. Noë tries to explain so much with the concept of self-motion, where it explains too

little. If one overestimates the power of movement one risks the mystification of this concept. As a declared naturalist, Noë's worry is surely to avoid any "unnatural process," "immaterial medium" or "unscientific spiritualism,"³⁰ as if these are the only existing alternatives to naturalism. The phenomenological method consciously intends to leave the "naturalistic attitude" behind itself and apply the "personalistic attitude." In what follows I will try to outline roughly this transformation of thought which Husserl initiated in his transcendental phenomenology in *Ideas I*.³¹

The difference between enactivism and Husserl lies in Husserl's method of "transcendental reduction" which does not reduce anything, but rather points and leads to the "transcendental I," the "pure I," as a subject, an expression of the spirit, of a person, which is the condition of the possibility of such a world. *Reducere*, literally "leading back," means showing the origin of something, exposing the cause or reason of something. Without this reduction, the individual I, like the subject of enactive perception, always amounts to the natural psyche, a living thing having anima, an "animal," as dealt in psychology. It is rather the transcendental phenomenology though, not just psychology, that allows for the more philosophical questions concerning the truth of perception, the essence of the absolute, the freedom of consciousness and the experience of the self. Husserl's "transcendental I" as the subjectivity of the "pure ego" is the very condition for the possibility of perception itself, thus a "subjective" condition. I reach this point after I perform the epochè, the "eidetic reduction," where I exclude or put in the brackets the "natural attitude" that I have towards the pre-given world, as I understand that I am overloaded with subjective opinions, feelings and prejudices. By "parenthesizing" the "general thesis" of naturalism, which means its naïve faith in the "natural" existence of the outer world, as an object dependent from consciousness and simply "in itself," the phenomenological analysis aims at the "things themselves" and their *Wesen*, their essence in the sense of their whatness and how it exposes itself for consciousness, as phenomena with various ways of being "given." This enterprise was all about overcoming the naturalistic approach to the mind. To say that perception is only enactive is to ignore another kind of perception, namely Husserl's "categorical perception" that enables the phenomenal "view of the essence" (*Wesenschau*), the original aim of the phenomenological inquiry. Categorical perception is that which lets us see something as something in the first place. Since perception in Husserl's phenomenology is the fundamental mode of givenness and thereby our access to the world, his question is exactly how to arrive at a non-naturalistic understanding of perception. This transcendental engagement is not to be found in this form in the enactive theoretical attempts.

As we have seen, the enactive perception turns mostly about the condition of self-motion and the expectations that knowledge about sensorimotor contingencies generates, so that some questions arise: What

does Noë understand by “understanding”? Which concept of concept does he hold? If cognitive phenomena have components outside the skull and the body, what kind of components are these? How does he conceive of the difference between animal and human perception? Noë’s concept of concept is very wide construed and somewhat misconceiving. Surprisingly, Noë designates perception as “conceptual,” since he believes that there are basic “natural” concepts that we somehow naturally possess, like “this is red,” just because we are able to see. Accordingly, he designates the behavior of a chimpanzee who wanted more and more jelly beans as “conceptual,” because she understood the concept “more.”³² In a similar context, he designates the positive relationships between apes and other members of their group as “conceptual and inferential skills.”³³ Strictly speaking, however, such “skills” can be seen as born biological instincts, and it cannot be absolutely proven whether this kind of “action” is to be understood as behaving upon instincts (*Verhalten*) or acting upon free will (*Handeln*). Due to the silence of the chimpanzee this question must be kept open and the debate cannot be decided for the chimpanzee in her name. The designation of natural comportment as action attests rather to a confusion than a new action theory. In fact, Noë’s premises are not wholly consistent with his own disapproval of Ryle’s methodological behaviorism that takes perception to be a disposition of behavior.³⁴ After all, a purely physicalist view of perception cannot prove along its own terms that cats perceive exactly like humans. Such reduced concept of concept bears too little content, if it does not refer us to categorical knowledge that lets us understand something as something in the first place, *a priori*, and so in its essence.

Noë’s considerations can be read as his attempt to solve the phenomenological problem of perceptual presence posed by Husserl: How can we conceive the factual presence (or co-presence) of the unperceivable? In Husserl’s terminology, we can never capture any spatial object entirely, since we always take a certain direct perspective to “fill it out” (*erfüllen*), which practically conceals other sides of it, other “profiles,” by “shading” (*Abschattung*). Yet, although we can “intuitively experience” (*erleben*) only one side of the object, we do actually “experience” (*erfahren*) the whole of it and gain consciousness of it. Perception always includes the “appresentation” of the hidden aspect of an object and we can “co-intend” or “co-mean” (*mitmeinen*) the implicit sides of the object, which are not perceptually given, because the perceptually given sides refer (*verweisen*) to it by means of the “referential context” (*Verweisungszusammenhang*) that connects the objects like in a chain, giving them meaning (*Sinn*). Husserl’s solution rests upon the idea of an open intersubjectivity as a meta-condition for objectivity in the broader context of intentionality: I understand emphatically that such hidden sides can be perceived by other potential I’s, other subjects, simply others. Noë’s solution to this problem remains empiricist, insofar as he explores this phenomenon under the psychological category of “amodal perception”³⁵ and concludes that the potential access to that which is not directly perceivable is

made possible thanks to learned sensorimotor abilities and to the expectations that result from them.³⁶ His claim is that we can perceive the object in each situation thanks to our action: our successful movement towards the objects. "You just have to walk over there."³⁷

Noë believes that perceptions of spatially given objects are the most solid basis for thinking about the world and hence expands the sense of the word "empirical" to include enactive perceptions as bearer of truth, whereas what is at stake is exactly the question whether true knowledge about the world can rely only on perceptions. Husserl's concept of truth takes truth to be an over-empirical ideality,³⁸ generated each time by a "community of human beings" (*Menschengemeinschaft*) that together creates the "history of human beings," a "cultural world" of persons and a "cultural community."³⁹ Beyond the given naturalty of consciousness we face the normativity of consciousness with its self-given norms, and beyond both there is perhaps the truth for both, in and for itself. The normativity of consciousness implies that knowledge claims are collectively verifiable and are indeed recurrently verified, whereby how we perceive our world is epistemologically determined and conditioned by established institutes of knowledge, transmission of knowledge from generation to generation, the exchange of cultural traditions, and the like. Due to this status of perception, in contrast to mere natural processes, perception can be erroneous and fail, mislead and deceive. The gaze can disparage, exploit and repress. Perception is, after all, amount to an opinion or *doxa*, or what Husserl called "pretension," not the whole truth itself, not *Wahrheit*, but *Wahrnehmung*, taking something to be true. To judge the quality of human perception it is required to go beyond the individual level of consciousness, because the systemic dependence of social groups on each other - the social structure - does not appear subsequent to the individual, but is a precondition for its existence. Neither the sociality of perception nor its subjectivity can be downplayed, since both stem from the ability of subjects to interact with each other and change their local reality, so that the question of freedom and free-will is involved as well. According to Husserl, with its own "free variation" of ideas and imagination, self-consciousness transcends the pre-phenomenological "natural attitude" and is capable of creating signs and symbolism.

Noë's theory of perception does not take the sociocultural and historical embeddedness of human experience into account. The life-world is co-constituted by other perceivers with different historical, temporal and linguistic views. Husserl dwells on the problems of concrete life-world of persons in his late generative phenomenology. Intersubjectivity is a precondition for mutual perception and perception of other minds. Albeit referring to Husserl's phenomenology, the enactive approach remains naturalistic and to a certain degree reductionist, insofar as human perception is determined only by physical change of sensual stimuli and hence by "laws of sensorimotor contingency."⁴⁰ In this, Noë remains a loyal successor of

Dennett's physicalism, despite his critique of Searle. Without the reference to the I's subjectivity, the enactive approach can hardly explain why we perceive the same phenomena differently in different times, languages, cultures, genders, social classes, religions etc. Nonetheless, there are a few enactive theorists who cordially endorse the exploration of classical phenomenological themes, for example Thompson who attaches great importance to the process of enculturation, claiming that "[o]ne of the most important reasons that human mentality cannot be reduced simply to what goes on inside the brain of an individual is that human mental activity is fundamentally social and cultural."⁴¹ Shaun Gallagher also points at this issue.⁴² Yet this is not enough.

What is at stake here is the status of phenomenology. The enactive approach declares that it seeks "to 'naturalize' phenomenology"⁴³ and it takes this project as a self-evident need, almost as zeitgeist. Given that, it's no wonder that Noë's declared intention is to develop a "natural philosophy of mind"⁴⁴ and a "natural philosophy of consciousness."⁴⁵ The possibility of naturalizing phenomenology in the sense of objectifying subjective experience by means of "a formalization of a consciousness" with the help of new mathematical theories has been ostensibly confirmed.⁴⁶ Yet, if Husserl's phenomenology was notoriously all about counteracting naturalism in the first place, why do we have to "naturalize" phenomenology at all? As Helena De Preester rightly claims, "[a] naturalized phenomenology is no longer phenomenology."⁴⁷ In this sense, enactivism is just another form of naturalism. By "natural," enactivists do not mean a general structure or a form in the sense of a generic logical meta-category, but rather the externally pre-given and presupposed totality of sensually detectable stimuli and purely material entities. Although Noë attempts to deliberate on perception as a whole, his use of the word corresponds to the rhetorical figure of a synecdoche, as he speaks for the most part of animal perception but says "perception." Insofar as he permanently refers to the "sensory contact with the world"⁴⁸ in a narrow sense, he reduces the idea of "world" (*Welt*) to "environment" (*Umwelt*) as physical nature, again another synecdoche. Scheler has pointedly critiqued this confusing tendency and offered a phenomenological account of this problem.⁴⁹

We now turn to Merleau-Ponty, who, like Husserl, also dealt extensively with the problems of perception by means of descriptive phenomenology, albeit in different ways.

Merleau-Ponty's Approach to Perception

Undoubtedly, Noë was inspired by Merleau-Ponty's description of perception as getting in touch with the world, "contacting" it and testing it,⁵⁰ when he adopted Merleau-Ponty's famous paradigm of perception as a tactile sense, not as sense of sight. He shares Merleau-Ponty's critique at the outset

of *Phenomenology of Perception*, namely his refutation of the empiricist conception of perception as a mechanic sensation, or as pure receptivity of sense data, and his conclusion that the physiological functioning of the sensory apparatus alone, without the functions of the surrounding world, cannot sufficiently explain perception.⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty also rejects there the rationalist (intellectualist) conception of perception as “interpretation” of a pre-given meaning, as a conscious “apperception”⁵² or as a “rational construction” made by “immaterial spirit” and suggests instead that perception ought to be considered from a bodily point of view, as it is the given situation of a living subject that is interlaced (*entrelacs*) with the “world.” He characterizes perception as the primordial openness to this pre-reflective life-world, as “being to the world” (*être au monde*). All in all, the enactive approach would subscribe to this.

However, the question is how do we understand this “world.” Merleau-Ponty goes a step further and directly attacks scientism, particularly the prejudice of every positivistic science that fabricates a world of objects wholly detached from the conscious mind and from the scientist herself, an “objective world,”⁵³ which is not far away from Husserl’s “general thesis of naturalism.” Merleau-Ponty, like Husserl and unlike Noë, does not deny or repress the subjective aspect of perception but rather criticizes that the misconceived understanding of perception as sensation is just another example for “the recently introduced object of scientific consciousness,” which is an imaginary object that “conceals rather than reveals subjectivity.”⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty argues that the question of perception must be therefore interlinked with that of consciousness’ self-reflection: How can consciousness grasp itself?⁵⁵ Again like Husserl and unlike Noë, he does not grasp the question of perception as separated from the question of a concrete consciousness, let alone of self-consciousness. Perception is not purely subjective, but it does stem from the original inner experience of a body-subject that constitutes its own objects of perception while being in the world.

This issue of subjectivity has consequences for the way the act of perceiving is described each time. Merleau-Ponty characterizes perceiving in terms of focusing on a figure emerging against a less determined background, from which it gets differentiated, while getting more and more determined through our “sense-giving,” what Husserl designated as *Sinngebung*. Interestingly, the same idea of the increase of determinations is used by Hegel in *Science of Logic* to describe a dialectic development, only that in Hegel it meant the whole process of determination which begins with the undetermined “pure Being” and ends with the fully self-determined “absolute Mind.” In Merleau-Ponty’s logic, the factuality of perception cannot be explained by that which is “empirically given” or by “rational construction,” exactly because it is all about “creating” the “sense” of something, “giving” it a meaning.⁵⁶ Perception is not just about discovering some pre-given “sense” hidden in the things, but rather a dialectical

“founding of being.”⁵⁷ In the enactive approach, however, the act of focusing is said to happen through the sheer physical movement towards the objects. The process of perceiving is not described dialectically. The question of “sense” does not take a central position and does not obtain a thorough analysis.

Merleau-Ponty stands thus in a long philosophical tradition that warns that dogmatic naturalistic commitments in the research might conceal the basic “original phenomena,” our very “world of culture,” the “human world,” the “home of our thought,”⁵⁸ where we commonly find ourselves at ease and at home, in contrast to nature which is for us a rather vague and remote entity. This idea too in some modification can be traced back to Hegel.⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty knows and relates to Hegel’s philosophy, when he employs the Hegelian concept of “objective spirit” in his critique of empiricism, arguing that “for the empiricism there is not such a thing as objective spirit,”⁶⁰ that is, there is not such a thing as “the memory of the community of thinkers.”⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty read Hegel, just as he read Husserl, Heidegger, Scheler and Marx. This paramount scholarship is typical for this phenomenological tradition. The enactive approach on its part remains faithful to analytic standards and cognitive science, even when it comes to deal with issues that concern social cognition and “linguistic bodies.” It is not by accident that enactivists speak more of “organisms” and “animals,” and less of “persons” or “human beings.” By “mind” they mean the individual mind of a single person, the intelligence of an animal.

If so, despite some philosophical differences from Husserl, on which we cannot dwell here in details, Merleau-Ponty draws on the same crucial distinction of the “world of persons” dealt by Husserl, for example, when he discusses the constitution of symbolism in language, arguing: “There is here nothing resembling the famous naturalistic conceptions which equate the artificial sign with the natural one, and try to reduce language to emotional expression. The artificial sign is not reducible to the natural one, because in man there is no natural sign [...]”⁶² The cultural world is taken by both phenomenologists to be the ground and horizon for our activities, not just the physical world. Their phenomenology treats the body as the living body one owns, as *Leib*, what Merleau-Ponty renders as *corps propre*. The *Leib* is not just the biologically understood body, but the mediation between matter, soul, and spirit, the speaking-thinking body that creates its own artificial world and inhabits it, lives in it. Therefore, the body, so understood, is even historically shaped, not just evolutionarily. Ken Pepper has referred to this issue: “There is therefore what might be described as a ‘historical’ dimension to the phenomenon of sensorimotor understanding which cannot be adequately captured by the language of commonsense psychology and ecological optics, to which Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology gives voice. And in so doing, it dissolves the worries incurred by Noë’s untenably impoverished account of the phenomena.”⁶³ A view that considers the human body mainly under the

aspect of an external moving object among other external moving objects, distorts and disfigures the substantial idea of *Leib*, as there cannot be an externality without internality. To be sure, for Merleau-Ponty, the animal is a higher form of existence, yet “another existence,”⁶⁴ or “order,” another form of “being to the world.” He distinguishes between the immediate real form of the existence “in itself” (“centripetal”) and the mediated intelligible form of the existence “for itself” (“centrifugal”),⁶⁵ while paraphrasing Hegel about nature and spirit. There too, spirit can go beyond nature and reach itself, while nature cannot go beyond itself in the same sense. This is a form of transcendental commitment in Merleau-Ponty’s anti-naturalistic phenomenology. Let us hear his thoughts about this in his own words:

The use a man is to make of his body is transcendent in relation to that body as a mere biological entity. It is no more natural, and no less conventional, to shout in anger or to kiss in love than to call a table ‘a table’. Feelings and passional conduct are invented like words. Even those which, like paternity, seem to be part and parcel of the human make-up are in reality institutions. It is impossible to superimpose on man a lower layer of behaviour which one chooses to call ‘natural’, followed by a manufactured cultural or spiritual world.⁶⁶

The naturalistic approach defines perception as animal perception and hence does not differentiate between animal and human perception, taking the difference to be quantitative, not qualitative, only gradually shaped, different in “degree.”⁶⁷ Noë’s assimilationist epistemology considers, for example, as a fact that animals and babies enjoy exactly the same full perceptual experience of human adults. Undoubtedly, humans also possess animal unconscious prototypes of perception, such as vigilance, awareness and attention, utilizing similar exteroceptive and interoceptive sensory organs. As explained before, there is a sense in which it is true to say that this kind of perception is “enactive.” Yet the complete concept of perception also contains a form of conscious perception with a certain direction that is intersubjectively shaped as a we-relation to the world, shared attention or joint attention. Human perception requires more than animal perception, insofar as it involves the process of creating shared meaning through signs and significations, and this process is, in turn, also engaged in that of giving meaning to oneself. If a theory of perception comprises only the necessary conditions for animal perception, but neglects other sufficient conditions for human perception, then its standpoint confronts only one “profile” of the phenomenon of perception, only one perspective, which is being “absolutized” to represent the whole of the phenomenon.

Perceptual experience is a typical object of phenomenological contemplation, not only because of the transcendental condition of its possibility, but also because it is conceptualized there in terms of its existential

meaning for human life. Taylor Carman illuminates the methodological difference between enactivists and phenomenologists in his observation that Merleau-Ponty “is concerned with perception not as a purely mental or cognitive operation, but as an aspect of human existence that conditions and situates thought.”⁶⁸ Merleau-Ponty accentuates the existential meaning of perception when he characterizes it as a form of habituality, as a feeling of familiarity and closeness, as that which “ties us to a world as if to our homeland.”⁶⁹ This thought is however not without a critical moment, for unlike Noë, who wishes to see the foundations of science in perception itself, Merleau-Ponty does not consider perception as the beginning of science at all, but rather “classical science” as a form of perception, only that science has forgotten that it is a form of perception, because it imagines that it has already been completed.⁷⁰ Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception is at the same time a critique of perception.

On the Late Merleau-Ponty and the “Radical Enactive Approach”

Let us give a thought about the late Merleau-Ponty, as it was claimed that his notion of “flesh” (*chair*) in *The Visible and the Invisible* is a radical conception of enactive cognition.⁷¹ I argue that this is the case, only if we understand by “flesh” the common meaning of the word and not that of Merleau-Ponty. In his late ontological writings Merleau-Ponty finds a new expression for the intertwining of perceiver and perceived, of self and world. When he postulates that “the human body is symbolism”⁷² he means that even in the “pre-predicative” level of perception our body can be understood in terms of “language,” a system of symbols. There is nothing “enactive” for Merleau-Ponty about symbolism since the act of signifying belongs to the human sphere, not the “natural,” as we learned before. Brain, body, and nature alike are embedded in the same material realm, the “flesh,” but it just means that they are a part of a larger, all-encompassing unity. This monist-like claim is fundamentally ontological, not epistemological. It does not reduce human language to a sensorimotor capacity, even if the chosen terminology is debatable. The ontological claim as such is more foundational: the intertwining that occurs due to the structure of “chiasm,” due to the “reversibility” of the senses (reciprocal or self-touching), points to the underlying interconnectedness of everything. This movement is more than just me enacting my environment, more than an ego rooted successfully in a physical world. When Merleau-Ponty argues that in the intimate contact between painter and environment, in moments when we paint a landscape or portrait, “it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted,”⁷³ he actually makes a strong claim about how everything that is perceivable has a certain “bodily” being, of course not anatomically, but so that every being can be closely intermeshed

with another being. This does not necessarily imply a way of acting, but a way of being in relation to the world. Merleau-Ponty describes this intermeshing of seer and seen as a certain way of being conscious and exchanging thought with the world, in the following way: “[...] I abandon myself to it, I plunge into this mystery, and it ‘thinks itself in me.’ I am this sky that gathers together, composes itself, and begins to exist for itself, my consciousness is saturated by this unlimited blue.”⁷⁴ This interrelatedness, which is central to the later notion of “flesh,” is already at work in the early Merleau-Ponty and is part of the effort to overcome the dualism object-subject.

And there is more to this. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges, Unlike Noë, that perception can be grasped as passivity, and demonstrates it with the notion of “flesh,” as John Jenkins argues:

First, by articulating the reversibility that grounds the chiasm between body and world in terms of activity and passivity, bodily being in the world provides an account of our being in the world that is not one-sidedly activist. Instead, the chiasmic relationship between activity and passivity in perception reveals the sense in which the body is both active in perception and passively open to the world, so that “consciousness” is chiasmically grounded in world and body.⁷⁵

Jenkins concludes that “[a]dopting the conceptual framework of flesh allows for an account of perception that is not strictly active because it integrates the passive dimensions of perception as well, e.g. through the incorporation of passive touch into tactile perception.”⁷⁶ This becomes plausible if we keep in mind that *percipere* contains both an active mode of doing, namely grasping in the sense of seizing, reaching and touching, as well as a reactive mode of doing, which is more passive, namely capturing in the sense of taking or catching. There is a certain boundary between acting and perceiving, as long as people with damaged locomotive system can indeed perceive the world, just as blind people perform successful actions in the world. As Jenkins is offering in his profound analysis, with the help of the late Merleau-Ponty some revisions must be taken in order to make the framework of enactivism more appropriate for phenomenology.⁷⁷

A Note on the Dialectical Movement and Critical Phenomenology

As long as the enactive approach is firmly committed to a naturalizing framework, it runs the risk of abolishing its access to phenomenology and hence of abandoning its own theoretical framework in a destructive kind of dialectical movement. A similar dialectical development is to be found in

Merleau-Ponty's work *The Adventures of Dialectics*, though transferred to the political dimension. It would be fruitful for future cognitive theorists to take notice of this dialectical conception of perception and perhaps as a consequent push their theoretical praxis more to the phenomenological and post-phenomenological direction. The recent enactive work of Di Paolo, et. al. *Linguistic Bodies* (2018) comes very close to this idea, as it takes our bodies not only as organic and sensorimotor, but mainly as "linguistic bodies." The question set there is: "[C]an we go from dynamic embodied processes to grounding ideas such as grammar, utterances, signs, symbols, etc.? There is a gap between these vocabularies. One of our goals is to fill in this gap."⁷⁸ This work even embraces a dialectical approach and takes Merleau-Ponty's dialectics seriously.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the researchers insist on the common "naturalistic" framework, a mantra repeated incessantly like a shibboleth amount the proponents of the enactive approach, this time in order to rule out the view that the body is only a "product of language," a view held by practically no one, which they label "antinaturalism."⁸⁰ Linking the linguistic mind with bodily motion, those researchers believe that these are "exciting times for the sciences of the mind" because of "the explosion of novel technologies, sophisticated models, and analytic tools that allow the study of bodies in action."⁸¹ Just a side question: If one insists on the continuity between nature and mind, and one rejects dualism, then it is not clear why it is necessary to use such an ism-word like "naturalism," and why not "mentalism" or "spiritualism" or whatsoever. When it comes to describing the mental and the mental capacities, one-sided-ism does not seem to do justice to the issue of continuity.

At this stage, it would be fair to suggest that phenomenology is not everywhere forgotten or in a need of resuscitation in view of the critical-phenomenological studies of gendered and racialized embodiment that have been recently published.⁸² With Merleau-Ponty in the background, they argue that habits of perception carry and sustain "sedimented sociality,"⁸³ which is why it is not adequate to analyze human capacities, such as perception, in a neutral abstract way, detached from any "historical specificity."⁸⁴ They go further to claim that the classical phenomenologists in fact downsize their own specific personal embeddedness, using banal examples for persons and objects and so not living up to their own standards, a bias to which they would like to provide a corrective.⁸⁵ Taken in this post-phenomenological direction, a self-aware inquiry into situated agency can become a powerful vehicle in the field of critical thought.

Conclusion

There are several issues on which enactivism and phenomenology fairly converge, but there are even more issues on which they completely diverge. Some ideas of the enactive approach stem from traditional analytic

philosophy and consist of affirmations along with negations of it. Its reference to phenomenology embodies the aspiration to go beyond itself in a dialectical process of becoming. In its reference to continental phenomenology enactivist theorists attempt to build a bridge between cognitive science and phenomenological thought, so that its merit is at any rate putting phenomenology, which was thought to be dead, at least in some quarters, back on the map.

Dealing with the enactive approach to perception bestows us with an excellent opportunity to set the question of perception once again, this time from a post-cognitivist standpoint, in relation to phenomenology and post-phenomenology, and in contrast to a new sophisticated form of physicalist naturalism. In the reawakening and recalling of Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological works we rediscover the naturalistic arguments about perception and consciousness which they confronted themselves. Husserl and Merleau-Ponty would not be reluctant to join the enactivist attack on the neuroscientific stance in cognitive science. The enactive perception adequately describes the animal perception and the necessary conditions for its emergence, but the problem is that this is not sufficient for the description of human perception, categorical perception and self-perception. Compared with phenomenology, the enactive approach sets the focus only on the physiological conditions of perception, not on its sociocultural embeddedness. The phenomenological way of thinking, its language and its objectives, remain *de facto* external and extraneous to the enactive approach, "the other," the other side of itself.

The oblivion of phenomenology, as perceived by those who speak with enthusiasm about the comeback of phenomenology, is interconnected with the evasive attitude of cognitive science concerning the inquiry into the historical and social dimensions of consciousness and perception. At the same time, it is disconnected from the enduring reception of phenomenology in other directions and disciplines. The genuine features of the forgotten transcendental or existential phenomenology can be rediscovered at any moment by anybody, also by "analytic" thinkers. Yet, in a tradition of thought, in which the philosophical methodology itself exhibits anti-historical characteristic, otherized traditions of thought like phenomenology, only a hundred years old, are perceived like a prehistory of thought and scarcely as genuinely "rigorous science."

Admittedly, there are difficult conceptual indeterminacies regarding the perceptive transition of sensations into cognition and perhaps the full understanding of perception has not been reached yet. The question of the ontological status of perception is a philosophical one and the debate on this issue should to be kept open. The question of perception touches the problem of human freedom with regard to the possibility of free sense-making, free "sense-giving," giving meaning to one's own existence on the grounds of perceptions and misperceptions. The question of free will cannot be dealt with

here, but for now it became perhaps clear that cognition science ought not be left to the hands of scientists alone, just as the hands of theorists of perception ought not to refrain from some phenomenological work.

¹ Ralph D. Ellis, “Phenomenology-Friendly Neuroscience: The Return to Merleau-Ponty as Psychologist,” *Human Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Jan. 2006): 33.

² The term was introduced in Evan Thompson, Francisco Varela und Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991). Some other works in the field: Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004); Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Science of the Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); John Stewart, Olivier Gapenne, Ezquiel A. Di Paolo, eds. *Enaction : Toward a New Paradigm for Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010); Shaun Gallagher, *Enactivist Interventions: Rethinking the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³ Also connectionism, see Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 4-10.

⁴ This beautiful image was chosen by Varela to describe the idea in a poem by the Spanish poet Antonio Machado: “you lay down a path in walking.” See Shaun Gallagher, “A well-trodden path: From phenomenology to enactivism,” *Filosofisk Supplement*, Vol. 3 (2018).

⁵ Noë, *Action in Perception*, 17; Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 14; Gallagher, *Enactivist Interventions*, 5.

⁶ Ellis, “Phenomenology-Friendly Neuroscience: The Return to Merleau-Ponty as Psychologist,” 33. See also: Gina Zavota, “Expanding the Extended Mind: Merleau-Ponty’s Late Ontology as Radical Enactive Cognition,” *Essays in Philosophy*, Vol. 17, 2 (2016): 94-155.

⁷ Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 265-266.

⁸ Mark Rowlands, *The New Science of the Mind: From Extended Mind to Embodied Phenomenology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010).

⁹ Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 225; see also Ken Pepper, *The Phenomenology of Sensorimotor Understanding* (Cham: Springer, 2014).

¹⁰ Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 24.

¹¹ Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 38.

¹² Noë, *Action in Perception*, 40-47. Noë shows that the refutation can be found in Descartes and is done on the grounds that such image theory postulates a problematic “homunculus,” a “small man” who supposedly sits in the pineal gland inside the brain and watches internal pictures. Since the homunculus would need another homunculus in his brain, this argument comes to an infinite regress and into a conflict, a vicious circle.

¹³ John Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), ix.

¹⁴ See also Gallagher, *Enactivist Interventions*, 1-25.

¹⁵ Noë, *Action in Perception*, 1.

¹⁶ Noë, *Action in Perception*, 2.

¹⁷ Noë, *Action in Perception*, 122.

¹⁸ Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 256.

¹⁹ Peter Strawson, “Causation in Perception” in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1974). According to Strawson, perception is a reliable source for true knowledge about the world, and due to this assumption, perception must be causally conditioned by the objects themselves. This view echoes the principle of Pythagoras and Empedocles, according to which an element can be recognized by the same kind of element.

²⁰ Noë, *Action in Perception*, 163.

²¹ Noë, *Action in Perception*, 187.

²² Noë, *Action in Perception*, 189.

²³ Noë, *Action in Perception*, 182.

²⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Thing and Space: Lectures of 1907*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997).

²⁵ Husserl, *Thing and Space*, chapter 8.

²⁶ Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenological Psychology: Lectures, Summer Semester, 1925*, trans. John Scanlon (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977).

²⁷ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989): 96-180.

²⁸ Husserl, *Ideas II*, 180-222.

²⁹ Husserl, *Ideas II*, 224.

³⁰ Noë, *Action in Perception*, 63.

³¹ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book: General Introduction for Pure Phenomenology*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2014).

- ³² Noë, *Action in Perception*, 186-187.
- ³³ Noë, *Action in Perception*, 187.
- ³⁴ Noë, *Action in Perception*, 220.
- ³⁵ Noë, *Action in Perception*, 61.
- ³⁶ Noë, *Action in Perception*, 62.
- ³⁷ Noë, *Action in Perception*, 63.
- ³⁸ Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, Volume 1, trans. J. N. Findlay (London: Routledge, 2001), 87.
- ³⁹ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht: Springer, 1973), §58.
- ⁴⁰ Noë, *Action in Perception*, 112, 115.
- ⁴¹ Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 403. He mentions it only at the end of his work and at the margin.
- ⁴² See Shaun Gallagher (2018), “A well-trodden path: From phenomenology to enactivism.” He deals elsewhere with linguistic in social cognition, Gallagher, “Understanding others: embodied social cognition,” in *Handbook of Cognitive Science: An Embodied Approach*, eds. P. Calvo and A. Gomila (Elsevier Academic Press, 2008), 439-452.
- ⁴³ Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 24.
- ⁴⁴ Noë, *Action in Perception*, vii.
- ⁴⁵ Noë, *Action in Perception*, 231.
- ⁴⁶ Liliana Albertazzi contends that naturalization of phenomenology “needs a radical change of viewpoint on the concept of nature and of consciousness, and to consider mathematics not exclusively applicable to physics, but also to phenomenological science or phenomenology,” in “Naturalizing Phenomenology: A Must Have?” *Frontiers in Psychology* (22 Oct. 2018).
- ⁴⁷ Even though she herself favors such a project in Helena De Preester, “Naturalizing Husserlian Phenomenology: An Introduction,” *Psychoanalytische Perspectieven* 20, 4 (2002): 645.
- ⁴⁸ Noë, *Action in Perception*, vii.
- ⁴⁹ Max Scheler, *The Human Place in the Cosmos*, trans. Manfred Frings (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 28-29.
- ⁵⁰ Noë, *Action in Perception*, 73.
- ⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 9-10.
- ⁵² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 154.
- ⁵³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 6-7.

- ⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 7.
- ⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 23.
- ⁵⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 38.
- ⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxxiv.
- ⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 25.
- ⁵⁹ Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature: Part 2 of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 17, § 248.
- ⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 25.
- ⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 42.
- ⁶² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 219.
- ⁶³ Ken Pepper, "The Phenomenology of Sensorimotor Understanding," 64.
- ⁶⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 126.
- ⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 114.
- ⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 220.
- ⁶⁷ Noë, *Action in Perception*, 185.
- ⁶⁸ Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 227. He mentions only a few reasons superficially.
- ⁶⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 336.
- ⁷⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 57.
- ⁷¹ Gina Zavota, "Expanding the Extended Mind: Merleau-Ponty's Late Ontology as Radical Enactive Cognition," in *Essays in Philosophy* 17 (2016): 94-155.
- ⁷² Merleau-Ponty "Nature and Logos: The Human Body," in *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 219.
- ⁷³ Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 167.
- ⁷⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 222.
- ⁷⁵ Jenkinson, John, *A New Framework for Enactivism: Understanding the enactive body through structural flexibility and Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh* (2017): 46. Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository. 4383. <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/4383>.
- ⁷⁶ Jenkinson, *A New Framework for Enactivism*, 47.
- ⁷⁷ He is clearly more interested, as he claims himself, in deepening the meaning of enactivism, rather than that of phenomenology. He takes sense-making basically as a mechanism of "survival" in nature and refers to language as a "tool."
- ⁷⁸ Ezequiel A. Di Paolo, Elena Clare Cuffari, and Hanne De Jaegher, *Linguistic Bodies: The Continuity between Life and Language* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018).
- ⁷⁹ Di Paolo, et. al., *Linguistic Bodies*, 121-122.
- ⁸⁰ Di Paolo, et. al., *Linguistic Bodies*, 6.

⁸¹ Di Paolo, et. al., *Linguistic Bodies*, 3.

⁸² Some relevant works: Linda Martín Alcoff, “Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Theory on Experience,” in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Flesh*, eds. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (New York, 2000), 251-72; Johanna Oksala, “A Phenomenology of Gender,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 39 (2006), 229-44; Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC, 2006); Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007), 149-68; George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham, MD, 2008); Sara Heinämaa, “Sex, Gender, and Embodiment,” in *Handbook in Contemporary Phenomenology*, ed. Dan Zahavi (Oxford, 2012); Lauren Freeman, “Phenomenology of Racial Oppression,” *Knowledge Cultures* 3 (2015), 24-44.

⁸³ See Jan Slaby, “The Weight of History: From Heidegger to Afro-Pessimism” in *Phenomenology as Performative Exercise*, eds. Lucilla Guidi and Thomas Rentsch (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 183.

⁸⁴ Slaby, “The Weight of History,” 194.

⁸⁵ See Slaby, “The Weight of History,” 192.