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Enactivism, phenomenology, autism

In my talk, I will focus on the enactive-phenomenological approach to the understanding of impairments in autism spectrum disorder. I will use the case of autism to show how phenomenology drives the progress of enactivism, which in turn exerted an influence on neuroscience, leading towards an integrative approach to (impairments of) social and shared cognition.

Gallagher and Allen (2016) distinguished three views on the neuroscience of prediction: predictive coding, predictive processing, and predictive engagement. Neuroscience of predictive coding should recognize that “the brain is part of a system that attunes to and responds to its environment” (Gallagher and Bower, 2017). This leads to the enactive account of “predictive coding” involving the whole brain–body–environment system. The enactive version moves away from the internalist vocabulary of “inference” and “representation” in favor of “attunement” and “affordance”. Fuchs suggests that instead of postulating “hypotheses” and “prediction errors” of the brain, a “better notion would be the match or mismatch of neural forward models or *open loops* with the current environment” (Fuchs, 2018, p. 152). Perceptual and motor capacities of embodied subjects form open loops with the environment. Dialectical misattunement theory of autism (Bolis et al., 2017), explains that the “communication misalignments and weak interpersonal coupling in social interactions might be the result of increasingly divergent predictive and (inter-)action styles across individuals” (p. 366). It provides an enactive-predictive processing account and, in terms of phenomenology, relates to Merleau-Ponty’s notions of intercorporeity and style.

Enactive theories assert the significance of dynamic coupling. Walsh (2020) argued that the very process of dynamic coupling is constitutive of the We on Merleau-Ponty’s “systemic whole” account. Interaction theories of social cognition, as part of the enactivist approach, could be interpreted as picking out a basic form of shared cognition, emergent coordination (León, 2016). Nonetheless, different forms of the We have not been worked out yet by the enactivists. Spelling this out in detail would be important for the understanding of disturbances in autism. Turning to phenomenology once more would lead to new improvements.

References

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Phenomenologizing Naturalism: Taking Phenomenology Transcendentally

I shall argue in favour of the compatibility of phenomenology with reductionist approaches in cognitive science, be that cognitivism or connectionism in Evan Thompson’s terms. This seemingly paradoxical position will be based on emphasizing Husserl’s both transcendentalist claims, that will lead to viewing the inextricable tendencies of his general project as irreducible to a meticulous description of individual experience, i.e. of an autonomous yet interacting-with-the-world system’s experience, considered enactivistically.

Firstly, I shall argue that attempts to put the enactivist approach transcendentally made by Francisco Varela and Evan Thompson fail to suffice for the notion of the transcendental elaborated by Husserl, nor do they provide ground for restoring phenomenology as the foundation of all sciences, as intended by Husserl. Three arguments may be applied here. The first of them is aimed to show the excessiveness of the possible enactivist attempt to ground the transcendental on the individual experience. The second argument focuses on negligence of the notion of the transcendental in the design of actual enactivist-style research. The last argument highlights the fundamental discrepancy between the modes of reasoning that underpin the enactivist notion of the transcendental and the Husserlian one correspondingly.

Then, I shall focus on some pivotal distinctions made by Husserl that enable us to set apart the Husserlian transcendental realm from what can be understood as experience within the enactivist approach. The first one is the thorough distinction of noema and noesis, that entails separate discussion of both in Husserl’s works. The second distinction to be mentioned is that between psychological and transcendental subjectivity. According to these distinctions, it shall be shown that a number of topics explored by Husserl (e.g., those of intersubjectivity and world as world-horizon) in order to question and re-think the ‘objective ideal’ of science relate to the sense of given phenomena primarily not just as to that revealing in individual experience, but as the only accessible sense that permeates vast areas of meaningful activity, which cannot be grasped in psychological fashion.