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Social enactivism about perception - Reply to McGann

I celebrate that Marek McGann has taken this opportunity to provide readers with a wealth of resources in participatory sense-making enactivism. McGann points out correctly that I did not mentioned them in my article. I am grateful for this opportunity to further engage in conversation about perception, enactivism, and sociality.

I first wish to make clarity about the scope of my account. My focus is *enactivism* *about perception*. I think this is vastly clear in my article, from the first paragraph on. I acknowledge, though, that the title could have been more specific. But again, the topics I talk about are quite specific: social dependent *perceptions*, my lenghty engagement with Noe’s sensorimotor enactivism about perception, my engagement with perception in Hutto and Myin’s, the perceptual case-studies presented (wholes and parts in vision, taste and habits, and flavors).

Having clarified this point, I maintain that autopoietic, life-mind, or participatory sense-making enactivisms do not offer a specific account of perception. An account of perception is to be characterized, among other things, by having perceptual occurrences as its main explanatory target, and engaging in a discussion about the descriptive and explanatory blocks of perception such as perceptual properties, recognitional and discriminatory capacities, or individuation of perceptual objects. There is here a substantive question about what grants a specific account of perception a place—and whether this is buying into models of “classical and cognitive science,” as de Jaegher is suspicious of (2018, 455). It is my view, that the pervasiveness of perception warrants this type of specific examination, that it is possible to undertake this examination in a situated cognition, enactivist framework, and that it is also worthy due to the possibility of engaging in conversation with broad swaps of the philosophical literature on perception.

To be clear, I do not claim that perception stands apart, conceptually, from the broader domain of cognition –or apart from the domain of life, as an “activity” in which things and events come to have meaning for cognizers. I do not claim that a more encompassing theory —e.g. a more encompassing social enactivism— could not reveal aspects of life and cognition that have ontological or epistemologically primacy over perception. Lastly, I am not saying that the types of social enactivims McGann referes to do not say things about perception.

I lament that McGann does not engage with any of my arguments. This is partly due to the fact that he misses what my argument is. I do argue that the social dependency of perception is a desiderata for a theory of perception. But this only a premise for my main argument, to wit: that a Wittgenstein-inspired, social practices-based notion of perception is the way to make *enactivism about perception* social.

Let me now explain why the strands of literature McGann points to are not domain-specific about perception.

The focus of participatory sense-making enactivism is not perception and the analysis is not perceptual. Its focus is the constitution of meaning in the social domain: “how meaning is generated and transformed in the interplay between the unfolding interaction processes and the individuals engaged in it” (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007, 486; de Jaegher 2018).

The target of the self-other contingencies approach (McGann and De Jaegher 2009, De Jaegher and Froese) is individual agency, not perception. The work of Kyselo, Lenay and Froese focuses on the limits of individuals alone for which perception is but a case, not its focus.

Likewise, the literature on social cognition, especially on the problem of other minds and the direct social perception account of it, is only subserviently perceptual. The specific connection with perception is perhaps more clear in De Jaegher’s “Social understanding through direct perception? Yes, by interacting” (2009). Here the focus is the understanding of others, not perception. Perception is instrumental to the goal of social understanding.

I finish with two points. I think there are substantive advantages of a social pragmatist take on sociality, and I recommend the reader of this reply to revisit my notion of perceptual practices and the way I apply such an account to perception. Second, what makes my account different from participatory sense-making is this crucial point: it focuses on the social *in perception*, not the social in general. This is something participatory sense-making enactivism does not provide. The approach I have put forth does not focus on the perceptual aspect of elements of the social, including the perception of others (as if perception occupied itself sometimes with social stuff and at other times it didn’t), but rather *on the social aspects that are constitutive of perception in general*. In what sense is perception social? That is my overall question, which my original article addresses.

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A different area explored by social enactivists (McGann and De Jaegher 2009) is referred to as “social cognition,” by which they mean cognition of others, specifically our undestanding of the other in interpersonal interactions. In other words, it is about how we make sense of others. To put it in more traditional terms, they take up the problem of other minds, and offer an enactivist solution to it. The specific connection with perception is perhaps more clear in De Jaegher’s “Social understanding through direct perception? Yes, by interacting” (2009). Here the focus is the understanding of others, not perception. Perception is instrumental to the goal of social understanding. The difference between this social enactivism and SEP is the difference between an account of the understanding of others partly through perceptual interaction, and an account of perception itself as an interaction, which is at the heart of SEP. However, for SEP our interactions with others are also interactions with the world, however peculiar, and in that sense, they fall under the scope of SEP. See chapter 1, footnote 29, for further clarification on the relation between SEP and the perception of others.

McGann and de Jaegher have talked about understanding others as a perception-based activity that, instead of *sensorimotor contingencies* (sensorimotor enactivism), relies on mastery of *self-other* contingencies. If Noë’s enactivism cashes the relation action-perception in terms of sensorimotor knowledge, McGann and de Jaegher propose a knowledge of the ways in which the subject’s behavior is attuned to others’, that is, how the subject masters the way in which others change according to her behavior, and the way she adapts to others’ behavior’s changes. These self-other contingencies are not perceptual, though they are perceptually based. For SEP, however, something more is needed. As an understanding of perception in general, SEP requires contigencies—or dependencies, as I call them—that are part of perception in general. The result is the three dependencies of perception that I develop in chapter 3.

Thus, in contrast with the social enactive theories just mentioned, the Social Enactive Theory of Perception (SEP) does not focus on the perceptual aspect of elements of the social, including the perception of others (as if perception occupied itself sometimes with social stuff and at other times it didn’t), but rather *on the social aspects that are constitutive of perception in general*. Instead of taking the social at first as its object and inquiring for how perception serves that goal, what is distinctive about SEP is that it takes perception and inquires into how perception, in its workings, is intrinsically social, that is, in how perception is partly constituted by the intersubjective domain. The different social enactivisms just reviewed are linked and are complementary in various ways, and I consider SEP to be broadly compatible with other available social enactivisms.

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