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### 3.2 Comment: Radical Enactivism and Inter-Corporeal Affectivity

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In his rich essay, “Implications for Psychopathology”, Daniel D. Hutto covers a fair bit of philosophical terrain. After laying out the general contours of enactive approaches to consciousness and cognition, Hutto then moves into a well-honed critique of the notion of “representation” at work in current philosophy of mind and cognitive science. An extended consideration of an enactivist approach to social cognition follows. The coda of the essay is a brief reflection on how enactivism might benefit psychopathology, specifically social understanding deficits in those with autistic spectrum disorders. While all of the topics as considered are quite interesting and worthy of comment, I will, for the sake of brevity, focus exclusively on the topic of social cognition considered from an enactivist (or *radically* enactivist, as Hutto would have it) perspective. Moreover, I should note at the outset that I generally agree with most of what Hutto argues for in his essay. However, for the sake of philosophical interest – philosophy is, after all, a rather dull affair if everyone merely nods in solemn consent with one another – I will offer a few critical remarks.

Despite the broad range of topics discussed therein, Hutto’s main concern in this essay is to investigate how our capacities and competencies for human intersubjective engagement play a central role in the development of the self (see Hutto in this volume, ch. 3.1, p. 43). Hutto’s guiding thesis is that the approach to mind known as *enactivism* is especially well-suited to provide a genetic account of these capacities and competencies. Enactivism is the view that consciousness and cognition are phenomena which emerge through recurrent patterns of world-engaged perception and action. These recurrent patterns of environmental interaction are part of the cognitive system’s self-organizing activities: activities through which the system autonomously enacts, or creates, both itself as well as its cognitive domain (Varela et al 1991). These recurrent patterns of environmental interaction are thus what give rise to cognitive processes and structures – including the cognitive capacities at the root of our social interactions.

One of the important consequences of the enactivist view is that the notion of “representation” is given significantly less currency than in more orthodox cognitivist approaches to consciousness and cognition, most of which posit the subpersonal manipulation of representations (variously defined) as the symbolic-computational

basis for intelligent activity.<sup>1</sup> Hutto defends his own flavor of enactivism: what he terms “radical enactivism” (RE). RE is distinct from “vanilla” enactivism<sup>2</sup>, Hutto urges, in that it endorses a “non-intellectualist, teleosemiotic account of basic cognition” (see in this volume, ch. 3.1, p. 44). Moreover, Hutto argues that that RE is in fact entailed by a proper understanding of how it is that organisms respond to and engage with relevant features of their environment in context-sensitive ways (see in this volume, ch. 3.1, p. 44).

Why prefer RE to orthodox cognitivism? Hutto argues that traditional representation-based, cognitivist approaches to mind suffer from a common defect: namely, “at bottom, all such approaches embed systematic misunderstanding of the notion of information upon which all the popular and most promising theories of naturalized mental content rest” (see in this volume, ch. 3.1, p. 46). Since Hutto’s RE avoids this troublesome commitment, it is a superior approach, one with greater explanatory promise (see in this volume, ch. 3.1, p. 52). Additionally, an important consequence of this argument, according to Hutto, is that enactivists need to avoid the conciliatory gesture of wedding aspects of their view to information-processing models of cognitivism in an attempt to forge a sort of marriage of convenience (i.e. where cognitivism provides the ground-floor explanation of mind and mental capacities whilst enactivism offers a dynamical model of how mind and mental capacities evolve over the course of their environmental interactions) (see in this volume, ch. 3.1, p. 45). This is, once again, because cognitivism is an explanatory flat tire, deflated from the very beginning – and riddled with slow leaks – via its resting on a philosophically confused and ultimately unsalvageable conception of subpersonal informational (i.e. representational) content. Thus, no matter how many enactivist band-aids we stick on it, the flat tire of cognitivism will never get us anywhere.<sup>3</sup>

Hutto’s criticisms on this issue are compelling and I am quite sympathetic to them. Therefore, I will not speak to this part of his contribution directly. I want to instead offer a few brief remarks about RE’s significance for understanding social cognition and the self. So how do the above criticisms of representation-based cognitivism, as well as the RE Hutto endorses, come to bear upon social cognition? According to Hutto, the salient point is this: if minds are in fact *not* the sorts of things essentially populated by contentful representations, RE is asking us to change our minds both about the nature of basic mindedness as well as the ground floor structures of social interaction (see in this volume, ch. 3.1, p. 55). That is to say, RE “motivates us to think again about what comes before and below the development of our full-fledged folk psychological (or FP) competence and what gives us the tools to do so” (see in this volume, ch. 3.1, p. 54). RE purports to give an account of the primitive capacities that

1 Varela, Thompson and Rosch write that, “it is precisely this emphasis on mutual specification that enables us to negotiate a middle path between the Scylla of cognition as the recovery of a pregiven outer world (realism) and the Charybdis of cognition as the projection of a pregiven inner world (idealism). These two extremes both take representation as their central notion ... Our intention is to bypass entirely this logical geography of inner versus outer by studying cognition not as recovery or projection but as embodied action” (Varela et al. 1991, p. 172).

2 This is my term, not Hutto’s.

3 No poet, alas, the author apologizes for his similarly airless metaphor.

precede more articulated folk psychological practices, such as attributing false beliefs to another, or employing theorizing or simulative process in the process of interpreting their intentions and behavior (i.e. the basic mechanisms within the “Other Minds” framework for social cognition).

It is precisely at this point that I want to (gently) press Hutto’s story a bit.<sup>4</sup> My suggestion is this: by stressing the importance of *narrativity* and *narrative practice* in his particular brand of radical enactivism, Hutto perhaps passes too quickly over more fundamental *affective* structures that scaffold basic forms of social understanding, support the emergence of sensorimotor skills enabling this basic understanding, and which motivate our most fundamental sense of self. These pre-narrative affective structures are what, at least initially, enable us to engage and respond to salient features of our social environment in a sensitive way from the very start. Simply put, they provide nonconceptual ground of social cognition and thus ought to be a crucial element in any enactivist account (radical or otherwise) of interpersonal understanding. Hutto would likely not deny anything I’ve just said; nor are the above claims, strictly speaking, inconsistent with the basic principles of RE. But they do reflect a subtle disagreement in emphasis. This comes out in the following remark: Hutto says that he would like to reserve “attributions of ‘understanding’ exclusively for those language-based (and more specifically narrative-based) forms of intersubjective engagement that have their own special properties and complexities” (see in this volume, ch. 3.1, p. 55). For Hutto, the embodied forms of our primary intersubjective engagements (i.e. the interactions we initiate and take part in from the very moment we’re born) are thus not based on “understanding”, at least in some principled or propositional sense. But I question whether this restrictive definition of “understanding” is either necessary or descriptively accurate. Consistent with his brand of RE, Hutto is motivated to make this claim by a desire to avoid filling up the infant’s head with representations and/or propositional attitudes. And this is certainly laudable. However, why not speak of our earliest intersubjective engagements as involving a kind of affect-laden, but nonconceptual (i.e. nonrepresentational), understanding? Why this is more than a mere semantic debate will become clear below.

For example, consider first Kenneth Kaye’s work on the origins of social intelligence. Kaye has argued that breast feeding – which consists of affective cycles of touch and movement – may play a crucial role in the infant’s social-cognitive development (Kaye 1982). Kaye observes that breastfeeding constitutes the most immediate and complex form of social interaction that neonates and mothers engage in soon after the child is born (Kaye 1982). He further notes that human infants are the only mammalian infants who breastfeed in short bursts. When human infants pause in their feeding, all mothers – including new mothers who report never having held a baby before their own – instinctively jiggle the infant as a bodily prompt to resume feeding. And this jiggling

<sup>4</sup> My critical pressing of Hutto is gentle in that it’s not clear to me that his view cannot accommodate the suggestions I make below; in fact, I’m quite sure that it can and, in some way, probably already does. I am merely suggesting that some of the things I draw attention to ought to be given more explanatory prioritization in Hutto’s account than they currently are (at least in the version that Hutto has here given us).

seems to work: infants are more likely to resume feeding in the pause just after jiggling than they are during the jiggling or if they had not been jiggled at all (Kaye 1982). This interaction is significant, in that it is arguably one of the earliest instances of social understanding. The mother communicates a nonverbal intention; and the infant perceives and responds to this intention – that is, she coordinates her bodily responses to it – in a way suggesting that she understands what the significance of this expressive gesture means. And the bodily-affective, give-and-take dynamic of this exchange thus provides a kind of “temporal template” for the infant’s future communicative encounters. This is because “the mother’s actions serve to organize this most basic and repetitive interaction between infant and mother, providing the prototype ... for turn-taking interactions in general” (Wexler 2008, p. 111). Via this interaction, the infant is entrained into basic rhythms of communicative interaction that structure later language and narrative-based forms of understanding.<sup>5</sup> But again, the salient point is that jiggling during breastfeeding seems to be an exceedingly early instance of a kind of affectively-driven, nonconceptual understanding passing between infant and caregiver. And this infant-caregiver dyadic unit is the shared scaffolding upon which the infant develops its primitive social skills.

Other examples speak to basic, but developmentally crucial, forms of bodily entrainment and understanding that are enacted within the shared inter-corporeal spaces of early infant-caregiver exchanges. The physical and affective intimacy of these interactions provides the developmental context in which the infant enacts processes crucial for its physiological and psychological growth. For example, Alva Noë points out that “[t]he child’s basic physiological processes – burping, for example – are facilitated by the mother” (Noë 2009, p. 50). The caregiver manipulates the child’s posture (drawing her up into a sitting position; laying her down in a prone position to engage with the child or to prepare her for sleep), guides the child’s attention to this or to that, and continually manufactures and organizes the child’s environmental structures to provide stimulation (or to mask it, in order to induce sleep), and to promote and maintain its psychological and physiological well-being. Thus, it seems that, “[i]n a very real sense, the baby-caretaker ‘dyad’ is a unity from which the child only gradually emerges as an individual” (Noë 2009, p. 50).

The first point of these examples is that even our earliest social interactions are bathed in feeling – that is, exquisitely tuned *feeling-relations* that attune us to others in fundamental ways, and which provide the inter-corporeal scaffolding both supporting and motivating the growth of our capacities and competencies for social engagement, as well as the development of our sense of self. In short, we are interactively – and *feelingly* – involved with others from the moment we are born. And these fundamental, affectively-charged “intersubjective relations between bodily-expressive persons are at the core of what is irreducibly interpersonal” (Hobson & Hobson 2008, p. 76). So, prior to the development of propositional thought, these feeling-relations cultivate our basic social capacity for

- recognizing another’s body as an expressive unity, and
- coordinating our own bodily responses to them, and by doing so creating the possibility for sympathetic attunement and shared feeling.

<sup>5</sup> Malloch and Trevarthen (1999) speak similarly of the “communicative musicality” that defines early infant-caregiver interactions.

And by referring to these processes as invoking a primitive sort of affective *understanding*, we are both honoring the experiential richness of these early encounters as well as situating them within the developmental trajectory of our social intelligence. More simply, we acknowledge the critical ways that interpersonal relations scaffold the passage from feeling to thinking (Hobson 2006). Surely RE ought to have something important to say about the suite of affective and sensorimotor skills that undergird these early forms of interpersonal relatedness. For within the enactive tradition, these skills are precisely what enable us to enact our world (including our social world), the various meanings that shape this world, giving it vitality and significance, and finally, to enact the self.

Secondly, the examples cited above affirm the fundamentally relational nature of the self. In spots, Hutto's discussion seems to me somewhat individualistic, in that the narrative-producing self is the primary locus of social agency. However, the examples cited above reinforce how self-awareness first arises via the encounter with the feelings and expressive behaviors of others – as well as, then, our attempts to attune and coordinate our own responses to these feelings and expressive behavior. Put otherwise, the self arises within a sympathetic context of *sharing*, that is, an affective ethos of bodily relatedness that confers phenomenally new (i.e. enriched) experiences of the world-as-shared (Tronick et al. 1998). And to again quote Noë, self-development is therefore “not so much a process of self-individuation and detachment as it is one of growing comfortably into one's environmental situation. We grow apart but we attach to the world without” (Noë 2009, p. 51). So, in sum: I'm not asking Hutto to change his story. Quite the contrary. It's a good story, a challenging story. I'm merely suggesting that Hutto tell his same story once again, *but with feeling*.

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## 4 Comment: A Common Ground Approach to Selfhood

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The question that seems most pertinent to all three of the contributions under discussion is a functional one: what is the self *for*, and what does it *do*? From this perspective, there is an immediate link between all three of these contributions: the self has a social function, and its role is inextricably intersubjectively and phenomenologically oriented. The self interacts with other beings and things, and it develops and perpetuates itself as a result of such interactions.

The neurocentrism apparent in critiques of the self beyond the very minimal has been convincingly argued against elsewhere in this volume (see Hutto, ch. 3.1) and elsewhere. While there is fascinating neurological data from the MNS studies, there is the non-reductionist aspect of selfhood to consider: while the neurological may indeed be vital to discussions of self, that does not by any means imply that we ought to begin or to centre our discussions there, and still less that we ought to consider nothing else. One logical point to begin with would be Hutto's radical enactivism: the whole body is involved in the detection of action and the response to it. As we saw above, this literally embodied approach is supported by MNS research: the MNS data shows subtle gradations of motor understanding even at the neural level (Sinigaglia 2009).

This neural subtlety ties in rather neatly with Zahavi's minimal, phenomenologically developed self: the MNS results show an identification with or recognition of the visual stimulus of a stranger performing an action with which we are intimately, *bodily* familiar. Zahavi's minimal self is established and developed through action, so it is perhaps unsurprising that familiarity with an action as it is seen when performed by another evokes a motor response on the neural level.

The link between the MNS and the minimal self brings us right back to the chicken-and-egg problem of intersubjectivity: does intersubjectivity precede subjects themselves, or is it the other way around? In order for there to be intersubjective interaction, there must be subjects to interact with each other, and these subjects are born with an astonishing capacity for interaction in spite of their lack of cognisance of mental states and ability to identify or attribute them. The capacity for enacted intersubjectivity is present in a newborn infant, but it takes practice and the development of social skills and the ability to make explicit mental state attribution before we can plausibly claim that true, uncontroversially reciprocal intersubjective experience is occurring.

From here, the logical step is to examine Metzinger's minimal phenomenal selfhood (MPS), which can be articulated as perception from an embodied and phenomenal-experiential perspective where the perspective is anchored in a holistic bodily experience. Smith has highlighted the difficulties with this notion of “anchoring” above, and he concludes that it can (without loss) be excluded from the discussion of self-experience. With a first-person perspective, all that anchoring can offer us is a range of problems concerning the unity of egocentric spatial phenomenology. MPS in