Interview

Enactivism and the nature of mind: Interview with Daniel D. Hutto

Interview by Mark McKergow and Kirsten Dierolf

Daniel D. Hutto is Professor of Philosophical Psychology at the University of Wollongong. He is a leading figure in the development of enactivist philosophy of mind, which moves away from the intellectualist idea that minds essentially represent and compute, and promoting in its place the a vision of minds as fundamentally embedded in and interactively engaged with the world. Dan was previously at the University of Hertfordshire, where he was involved with Mark McKergow in setting up the HESIAN research hub connecting enactive theory with solution-focused (SF) narrative and interactional practices. Together they see the enactivist movement in the philosophy of mind as being very congenial for understanding SF practice and its effectiveness.

Dan recently moved to Australia and began the interview by giving a Skype tour of his new house complete with palm trees and a swimming pool. He mentioned that while enactivist ideas have gained some acceptance in Europe, there are special advantages to bringing them to the closer attention of the Australian philosophical community, given that so many of its senior figures are committed to naturalistic approaches to mind. Hence the move to Australia has provided an opportunity for interesting debate and a way of extending the enactivist movement.

Your work is about distinctions between representationalists and enactivists – to start with, please give us some of the key ideas around the big issues here.

My new book with Erik Myin, *Evolving Enactivism* (MIT Press) outlines the major distinctions. A major part of the book concerns the primary nature of mind. Is mind distinct from the body and the world? According to representational and computational views, that have their roots in theories advanced by Descartes and Hobbes, the mind is something that stands over and against the world but relates to it. Canonically, we represent the world when we think of things in ways that can be true or false. The way the world is may not be how you are thinking about it. That's the key idea of representationalism. But our minds not only represent things. We can also think systematically about them, making truth-preserving inferences and generating new thoughts. Thinking can be understood as the manipulation of representational items. That is the key idea of computationalism. Together these two ideas constitute the traditional picture of mind. They are the twin pillars of cognitivism.

These traditional ideas promote a vision of cognition that separate it from sense perception on the one hand and embodied action, on the other. Mind, so the story goes, is something that is informed by the senses and which guides behaviour. This is sometimes called the classic sandwich view – the mind is the meat in between these other things; it is a cognitive mechanism which is separate from the body and the world. This has long been the mainstream way of thinking about minds – one which gained enormous popularity along with the rise of computers post-Turing in the 20th century.

Enactivism challenges this mainstream view of mind. It maintains that in a fundamental way minds are embedded in the world, they do not represent it. Rather minds are thought of as extensive embodied activities, they relate to the world and are also part of it. For enactivists, living systems are a better model of mind than computers. They provide a way of

understanding mind in terms of relational dynamical processes rather than as the manipulation of abstract representations. Enactivists promote a de-intellectualised and more dynamical view of basic minds. It looks to living systems that interact, engage with the world and generate and sustain themselves as a better way to understand what lies at the heart of cognition. Enactivism takes inspiration from and has affinities with both Eastern traditions of thought and pragmatist and phenomenological traditions in the West. Many of its major ideas also find support in the philosophy of Wittgenstein.

The radical version of the view that I and my co-authors promote offers a revolutionary new way to think about the mind. Going against mainstream assumptions, it obliterates the ontological divisions between mind and behaviour, mind and perception and mind and the world. The magnitude of the rethink is in the order of a Copernican shift in the cognitive sciences – this is because radical enactivism requires a shift in our thinking about the metaphysics and ontology of mind. As Jerry Fodor says that there are many things that 'a sufficiently shameless philosopher of mind can contrive to have both ways', but it is not possible to endorse both the radical enactivist and mainstream vision of mind. It's an important debate – the stakes are high.

So you're against the 'mental', then?

Enactivism is not against the mental – no more that Wittgenstein ever was. Enactivists promote a different way of thinking about minds to that found in the mainstream, but that is not to say minds do not exist. We want to understand mental phenomena – such as perceiving, imagining, remembering – differently; these are phenomena of interest to everyone who wants to understand the mind. Cognitivists don't get to define such phenomena, hence it is surely possible to understand these phenomena in a non-cognitivist way. Unless that were so if cognitivism failed one would have to eliminate the most important things about our psychology. There are philosophical schools of thought that try to do this

– for example eliminative materialism – but this is a stark and nihilistic position. When we are talking about theory-neutral phenomena were are using the word 'cognition' in an innocent and encompassing, rather than a philosophically loaded, way. The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that cognition picks out a whole raft of things like knowing, perceiving, imagining, and remembering; those are things we are interested in.

How does this affect the way we think about mental illness?

There have been longstanding attempts to try to understand mental illness/disorders (these are all loaded terms of course, used here with caution) though the lens of best new theories in the cognitive sciences. For those attracted to mainstream cognitivist theories the tendency is to look to the individual and then to one small part of that individual – the brain – regarding it as the ultimate locus of all mentality. Accordingly this promotes that idea that mental problems are brain-bound. And if you tend to think about mental problems that way, you will also tend to think about the ideal solutions to such problems that way too. Why not go to the ultimate source of the problem, the brain. If you really want the long-term solutions, on this view, you should clearly tackle the problems at source. This encourages a medical model view of psychiatry. Such a view is seductively attractive. Thus even Andy Clark (a world famous, Edinburgh-based philosopher who recognises the embodied, embedded and extended nature of minds) nevertheless regards cognitive neuropsychology as the great hope for psychiatry in his book *Surfing Uncertainty* (Clark, 2016).

For enactivists the brain still matters crucially to cognition, of course. It has a central a part to play in making cognition possible. To tweak the old American Express slogan the enactivist motto is, "Brains, don't leave home without them!". However, if enactivists are right, we can't look to the brain to tell the whole story of minds. In particular brains don't

primarily do the work of representing the world, and – more importantly – as radical enactivists see it, representing the world isn't the essence of mindedness anyway. Accordingly, this makes room for the idea that mental difficulties are not to be wholly explained within the brain but may arise from dysfunctional ways of interacting with other people or things – ways of interacting which could be put back in line by some kind of readjustment of the client's tendencies of response.

Why and how does SF fit so well with the enactive view of mind?

In a very general sense – this is not unique to SF but is shared with several other approaches – enactivism encourages a general approach to therapy that seeks to shift whole person styles of engagement into a 'more normal range'. It provokes questions about how this might be best achieved by changing existing patterns of interactions. How might you shift your perception of affordances – the possibilities that you perceive the world offers to you? Many forms of therapy, somatic therapies, dance therapies and so on, seek to realign and reset our interactive tendencies of response. And here is the point of connection between enactivism and the big idea of SF approaches: you don't NEED to know the cause of problems to respond to them effectively, because there is NO single mental cause located in the brain or anywhere else. What you really want to know is how to change the existing patterns of response and get the system to develop new patterns of inter-action that are more fruitful, responsive and flourishing. So the goal and driving ideal behind SF fits perfectly with the enactive idea that our focus should be on how we shape our interactions and responses to the world rather than always by seeking to change how we think about we represent the world in order to change our responses.

Divining internal causes is part of some traditional therapies – are these approaches out of tune with the enactive approach?

In important respects, they are. A brutal caricature of psycho-dynamic approaches might regard them as trying to get clients to identify or locate the underlying cause of their trauma. Isolating the cause becomes the focus of activity because it is part of the process of getting past it and overcoming the trauma. In that framework there is some kind of psychic disturbance that needs to be dealt with and it is crucial to identify as part of the therapy. Carried over to psychiatry more generally, you can see a similar attraction of the medical model. There the ideal approach is thought to be to try to locate the cause of mental disorders in the brain! I've just had gall bladder surgery, and they (rightly) went in and yanked out the problematic organ, and in some traditional therapies people are following the same medical line of thinking with respect to 'psychological' disturbances. Such therapies overlook the possibility that it is possible to shift people into more fruitful ways of being, without knowing the ultimate cause or source of their disturbances – and even sometimes by avoiding focusing on them. It seems that is what SF approaches seek to do, and from an enactivist point of view that makes perfect sense and can be highly appropriate in many cases.

You mentioned dance therapies, which people assume are quite obviously embodied. SF is a conversational approach – is that embodied too? Some people seem to think it isn't.

Conversations are not disembodied. I have written a lot about the role of narratives and discourse in shaping ourselves. One might think that is merely textual; that talking cures in general are somehow removed from bodies, but that's clearly absurd – there is much more to our conversational and narrative practice than mere text. We don't have disembodied conversations; we have differently embodied conversations – even if

we are sitting on opposite sides of the world and communicating via Skype.

How is that that retelling a story about one's own past can shift the way you can perceive affordances in the here-and-now? David Denborough from the Dulwich Centre for Narrative Therapy here in Australia puts this in a nice way: it's not that the therapy is designed to stay in the purely discursive domain (whatever that might mean), it's meant to alter your embodied skills and habits, your ways of responding. The aim of therapy is to make you more 'response-able' – better able to respond.

I am very interested in working philosophically in understanding how, in general, this is possible. In my previous book *Radicalizing Enactivism* (Hutto & Myin, 2013), we discussed this under the heading of the 'interaction problem'. I want to follow up on this in future research – people assume from a Cartesian position that in conversing we must be changing the representational-computational setting of our minds. To provide a proper enactivist alternative we need a more developed account of how narrative and discourse can have its special features while also being embodied. Having special contentful features doesn't make discourse disembodied. Some interactions can involve content which changes the dynamics of the interaction in important respects – it fuels things in different ways, changes how we respond, how we act and so on. When you think about content and discourse coming into the story it does not change the fact that the cognition is at root interactive. Some interactions involve content but cognition in general need not be based in the manipulation of contents. In the same way, coffee can transform our interactions but no one would be inclined to think that in such cases coffee grounds out interactions. The same goes for content. When we understand discourse as embodied in this way, we get closer to the picture we need.

You've mentioned 'content' there – what do you mean by that?

Content is what I am talking about when I say "Enactivism provides a new way to think about minds"– it is what is said or thought about in such cases. It's an everyday notion. In the hands of philosophers it becomes a more technical notion, connected to the representational picture of mind – there it is taken to be 'what is represented'. According to that tradition, the mental content of a thought is what you are thinking about, which may be different to how the world is. On that model, the content of language – which is seen as just a medium of communication – derives from original mental content. Accordingly language is seen as a mere expressive device that conveys mental contents derived from our minds.

So content in the representational picture is something mental that underwrites what it is possible to say in language. Even radical enactivists do not deny the existence of content – we talk about things, and think and say things that can be true or false. But enactvists deny that language gets its meaning from mental contents. Contentful practices like language and discourse are grounded in deeply embodied styles of engage-ment – in the way public symbols are use in our socio-cultural practices. There are traditions of philosophy, following on from Wittgenstein, Davidson, Brandon and others, that agree with enactivists in viewing contentful language as based in the public practices of embodied creatures rather than as issuing from and being borrowed from disembodied contents of minds.

You mentioned the next philosophical steps ... What do you see as some next possible steps for combining this enactive philosophical position with the development of practice in the world?

One step would be to focus on the status and the future of psychiatry. The more the medical model takes hold, the more that SF, narrative and other therapies will be seen as stopgaps

at best, and not truly proper treatments. It might seem as if there is a proper scientific basis for traditional mentalistic therapies, on the one hand, andhomespun folky approaches, like SF and others. If enactivism is right this is not the way to think about the full range of possibilities for therapy or psychiatry. If the dominant medical model is not challenged, then there is a risk that some valuable therapies may get sidelined. A useful development would be to use the enactivist view of the mind, to challenge the oft-heard claims that brain or genetics are wholly and solely the best place to look when trying to understand the true character of minds.

We also need to get clearer about the relationship between theories and practice. One of the problems is that the people working at the coalface in practice can think that such theoretical discussions which are arcane, esoteric and irrelevant. But avoiding theory can sometimes result in practitioners being without the tools needed to persuade people of the value of the therapeutic engagements that they undertake.

One major contribution philosophy could make would be to help practitioners and policy makers to better understand the theoretical landscape. For example, this might involve getting clearer about how current attitudes about the nature of mind might deter taking seriously new and effective invasive procedures that may make a difference to people's lives. Also, another contribution philosophy might make would be to get under the hood of these therapies to better understand how and why they might work. How we think about something plays a major role in whether we take it seriously or not. For example, if you get into the confusion that conversation is disembodied, then you might be mystified that it can have the effects it appears to have. That might be enough to make you sceptical about a certain therapy. Philosophy can help to remove such barriers of thought.

If people want to find out more about enactivism, how might they do that?

If you're looking for the big philosophical background (separate from the therapy considerations), then my three books with MIT Press are a good start: *Folk Pychological Narratives* (Hutto, 2008), then two books written with Erik Myin (Hutto & Myin, 2013, 2017).

For work more clearly connected to therapy, people might like to look at a paper with Shaun Gallagher about narrative therapy (many of the main messages ought to apply to SF as well) *Re-Authoring Narrative Therapy*, which is available online (Hutto & Gallagher, 2016). There is also my paper in Frontiers in Psychiatry (an open access journal so it's easy to get hold of and freely available) on *A Reconciliation for the Future of Psychiatry* (Hutto, 2016).

I am currently discussing the prospects of a collaborative project with a Solution-Focused centre based in Sydney, Australia, which would pursue some of the lines of research mentioned above. I also look forward to discussing these ideas further when I deliver my keynote to the Australian and New Zealand Solution-Focused Conference to be held at the University of South Australia in Adelaide, 14-16 July 2017.

Thank you very much.

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