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What exactly is the “spirit” of enactivism?

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Although I applaud John Teehan’s approach to cognition, and generally share his criticism of cognitivism, I argue that radical enactivism is not the only solution to achieve explanatory models of religious ideas and behaviors.

My colleagues and I at the Religion, Cognition and Culture Research Unit (RCC) in Aarhus have been struggling for some 20 years to get cognitive science of religion (CSR) scholars to realize that cognition is more than computational, mental representations (Geertz, 2008; Jensen, 2002). Throughout this struggle, we were mostly concerned with the methodological rejection of culture as having any causal effect on cognition, which flies in the face of everything we know about the brain and its development during the first 20 years of human social and cultural life.

Curiously, brain and body have not played a role in the foundational theories of CSR (Geertz, 2010b; Schjødt & Geertz, 2017). During the past couple of years, my colleagues and I have tried to encourage CSR folks to get interested in the 4E movement (which understands cognition as being embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended, thus “4E”) (Geertz, 2010a; Kundtová Klocová & Geertz, 2019). Therefore, I welcome John Teehan’s intention in broadening CSR’s understanding of cognition.

Teehan mentions my work and that of my RCC colleagues but claims that an “E” is missing in our work, i.e., enaction (pp. 3–4 and note 3). He cites Matylda Ciołkosz’s claim that my approach is not “enactivist in spirit” (Ciołkosz, 2017, p. 132, note 5). Drawing on Hutto and Myin, Ciołkosz argues that my approach is a variety of cognitivism called “conservative embodied cognition.” In fact, Hutto and Myin call that type of approach “conservative enactive (or embodied) cognition (CEC)” (Hutto & Myin, 2013, p. 11). Although Ciołkosz demarcates her approach from mine (Ciołkosz, 2017, pp. 140–141), I would argue that enactivism is a necessary component of the *whole framework* of 4E and do not think that any one particular “E” is sufficient to explain cognition or culture or religion. There is no magic bullet, only complicated somatic, emotional, cognitive, social, and cultural layers and mechanisms that have come together in the evolution of our species (Turner et al., 2018; Turner & Geertz, 2023).

My question to Teehan is, what exactly is the “spirit of enactivism”? Although there are some common assumptions in enactivist literature, many enactivists spend most of their time and printed space criticizing not only cognitivism but also the three other E’s (Hutto et al., 2014; Maiese, 2018). Furthermore, and more importantly, they also criticize other enactivists (see for instance Hutto & Myin, 2013; Popova, 2014). In a recent target article, Dengsø and Kirchhoff argue that radical enactivists are not radical enough. In fact, they claim that radical enactivism is not even in line with current systems biology and thus evolutionary theory, which Teehan is rightly worried about (Dengsø & Kirchhoff, 2023). Although these philosophical debates are very important, they leave the rest of us bewildered. There are clearly various types of enactivism and representationalism, which

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complicates matters to the extreme (Steiner, 2014). I, for one, do not think that radical enactivism is useful in explaining religious thought and behaviors.

Agency detection (and enaction) is something that we have shared with all other animals since the appearance of brains during the so-called Cambrian explosion (Geertz, 2015; Trestman, 2013). So, what characterizes *human* cognition? It consists, of course, in “higher” cognitive functions, such as planning the future, identity formation, memories, fantasies, mind-wandering, dreams, and all those other higher cognitive functions that characterize our species. It strikes me that enactivism can only explain a small part of this.

Teehan argues, “To continue to maintain that basic cognition is about processing representations of information would be to limit the extension of the term ‘cognition’ to those later, complex, socially mediated processes most distinctive of language-users, and most prominently, to humans” (p. 15). In note 9 he argues that the distinction between basic cognition and representational cognition is crucial and goes on to note that “humans are born into a socio-linguistic environment,” and “from infancy, words and symbols constitute perhaps the defining element of the developmental environment.” He further remarks that “this is why it is so natural to see cognition as all about manipulating representations.” I hold that the relations between basic embodied cognition and representational cognition are much less clear-cut that Teehan assumes.

Teehan does, in fact, accept a compatibility of enactive cognition with some representations (p. 8), but, I assume, not with others. This cryptic claim of compatibility with some representations is not discussed, but simply backed up by a reference to Ciołkosz (Ciołkosz, 2017, pp. 137–138). Furthermore, he argues that his rejection of representationalism does not encompass “representations as products of socio-linguistic practices” (p. 9). I may be missing some abstruse argument here but think that a much more comprehensive clarification is needed.

Representations obviously fill much of religious behavior and thought. As noted, Teehan passes over them rather quickly as a socio-linguistic overlay on a more basic non-representational cognition (see also p. 13). So, in a way, we are back to the same struggle that my colleagues and I have been engaged in concerning the methodological suspension of cultural causality on cognition. Frankly, I have difficulty imagining how a non-representational approach can explain religious ideas and behavior. How would Teehan apply non-representationalism to a religious text?

It strikes me that enactive reading is a possible solution to the problem. Enactive reading is really picking up in literature studies and delivering interesting results (see for example Kukkonen, 2014b; Troscianko, 2014). Enactive reading posits that when recipients hear or read a narrative, they enact the narrative based on their embodied priors—that is, sensorimotor, emotional, and personal experiences and contextual knowledge. Recipients approach a text with prior expectations and interact with the narrative as they would interact in any other social situation. Thus, recipients draw on this embodied knowledge to enact the story-world of the narrative, thereby making it as vivid as if they were themselves witnesses to or participants in the narrative (Harkins, 2023; Høgenhaven et al., 2024; Shantz, 2021). A number of scholars have also argued that predictive processing fits very well with both an embodied and enactive reading approach (Kukkonen, 2016, 2014a; Mendonça, 2019; Nave et al., 2020).

Enactive reading practitioners are careful, however, to note that enactive reading does not replace other approaches, but rather builds on them, and, furthermore, the important point that not all texts are well suited for enactive reading (Grethlein & Huitink, 2017; Mak & Williams, 2019). Perhaps enactivists should take this more balanced understanding of cognition to heart.

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