

Gallagher, S. 2005. Review of Alva Noë's *Action in Perception*. *Times Literary Supplement* (close to finalized version).

In *Action in Perception*, Alva Noë provides a persuasive account of the “enactive” approach to perception, according to which perception is not simply based on the processing of sensory information, or on the construction of internal representations, but is fundamentally shaped by the motor possibilities of the perceiving body. As John Dewey put it in 1896, in his essay, “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology”,

we begin in perception not with a sensory stimulus, but with a sensorimotor coordination . . . it is the movement which is primary, and the sensation which is secondary, the movement of body, head and eye muscles determining the quality of what is experienced [In audition] the sound is not a mere stimulus, or mere sensation; it again is an act It is just as true to say that the sensation of sound arises from a motor response as that the running away is a response to the sound.

Noë is not concerned to provide a history of the enactive theory, and he doesn't cite Dewey or other forerunners, like the Scottish philosopher Thomas Brown (1778–1820), though he does mention Berkeley and Poincaré. A more immediate influence on his work is Francisco Varela, who introduced the term “enactive”, and his aim is to provide the best arguments for this theory based on the latest empirical science. In doing so, he gives us what is clearly a pragmatic theory of perception. Perception is action; it is shaped by what we do, and what we are capable of doing – our pragmatic possibilities and the sensory-motor contingencies of our bodies. Experience is not determined simply by neuronal states that are activated by sensory input; it depends on the sensorimotor skills of the perceiver.

Noë puts the brain back into the body, and the body back into the world. Perception is a way of coping with the environment. “The main idea of this book”, he says, “is that perceiving is a way of acting. Perception is not something that happens to us, or in us. It is something we do.” The action, for enactive theorists, is not in the brain; it is the organism as a whole acting in the environment, what Dewey called the organism- environment, that must be treated as the site of perception. Vision is not a representation that emerges in a network of neurons, it is rather “a mode of exploration of the environment drawing on implicit understanding of sensorimotor regularities”, where understanding means know-how and practical skill. After reading Noë, any account of perception purely in terms of brain representations seems rather washed out.

Noë takes a minority stand on the currently pervasive concept of representation in the cognitive sciences. If we are in the world, he says, and can access the environmental detail relevant to our needs, there seems no need to create an

internal representation of that detail. Just as when I need to talk to a friend, and she is standing right in front of me, it would be odd to call her on the phone, so it is odd to think that although the environment is immediately present, we need an internal representational model of it to perceive it. He notes that “we sometimes need to think about the world in the world’s absence (when it’s dark, say, or when we’re blind, or not at the location we’re interested in), and for such purposes we must (in some sense) represent the world in thought”, but his own description of blindness can be used to raise a doubt about whether one would have to represent the world in thought because one was blind, as if thought is required in order to make up for the lack of vision. He points out that blindness is not “a state of blackness, absence, and deprivation” or incompleteness. “The longterm blind do not experience blindness as a disruption or absence the blind do not experience their blindness at all.” We do not experience our inability to see through the wall into the next room as a disruption or deficit, nor do we experience our failure to pick up as many odours as a bloodhound or see as many colours as some birds as a lack in our sensory field. So too the longterm blind do not experience their blindness as an absence. And Noë’s larger argument is that just as there is not a representational slot that remains unfilled in the blind person, so there are in fact no representational slots for any sensory modality. Rather, our sensory information is carried to the things themselves by our motor capabilities.

In working out a defence of the enactive theory, Noë covers more ground than can even be mentioned in a short review. There are detailed discussions of vision, causation and content, consciousness and qualia, perceptual perspective, constancy and presence, as well as critiques of computational theories of cognition and sense-data theories. What we don’t find is any mention of social perception, or what our encounters with others might contribute to our sensory-motor capacities, though there is an important sense in which we learn from others what to look for and how to manipulate and understand things. Noë’s account of perception is focused on what we might call the “mechanical dynamics” of thing-perception – how we experience constancies of colour, shape, distance, and so on; issues of intersubjectivity seemingly don’t enter into it.

Noë’s emphasis on action in perception also excludes any consideration of more passive aspects of perception. For example, neuroscience has demonstrated that when I see an object that I can manipulate, “canonical” neurons are activated in pre-motor areas of my brain, that is, those areas responsible for my possible action in regard to that object. This neural activation in my motor system is fully consistent with the enactive view of perception; but it is not the result of a decision on my part, it is not an activity of mine. It occurs automatically and is a passive, affective part of my perception of those objects. Perception, then, is not entirely an action, although it certainly involves my possible action. *Action in Perception* is an extremely lucid, philosophically worthwhile book; and it is, as Andy Clark remarks on the jacket cover, “action packed”.