
Concept Pluralism, Direct Perception, and the Fragility of Presence

Alva Noë

This paper has three main aims. First, I criticize intellectualism in the philosophy of mind and I outline an alternative to intellectualism that I call Concept Pluralism. Second, I seek to unify the sensorimotor or enactive approach to perception and perceptual consciousness developed in O'Regan & Noë (2001) and Noë (2004, 2012), with an account of understanding concepts. The proposal here—that concepts and sensorimotor skills are species of a common genus, that they are kinds of *skills of access*—is meant to offer an extension of the earlier account of perception. Finally, I describe a phenomenon—fragility—that has been poorly understood, but whose correct analysis is critical for progress in the theory of mind (both perception and cognition).

Keywords

Actionism | Concept pluralism | Concepts | Consciousness | Enactive account | Evans | Fragility | Frege | Intellectualism | Kant | Perception | Plato | Presence | Sensorimotor account | The intellectualist insight | The intellectualist thesis | Understanding | Wittgenstein

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1 Introduction

The present study takes its starting point from the enactive or sensorimotor, or, as I now prefer to call it, the actionist approach to perception and perceptual consciousness (O'Regan & Noë 2001; Noë 2004, 2012). Actionism is the thesis that perception is the activity of exploring the environment making use of knowledge of sensorimotor contingencies. Sensorimotor contingencies are understood to be patterns of dependence of sensory change on movement. The proposal, then, is that we make use of this knowledge of the way our own movement gives rise to sensory change to explore the world. This knowledge-based or skilful activity *is* perceiving.

We characterized the relevant kind of knowledge as *knowledge* precisely in order to mark the continuity between perception and “higher”, more intellectual kinds of cognition such as thought and planning (O'Regan & Noë 2001). At the same time, we were quick to characterize the relevant forms of knowledge as practical, non-propositional, as implicit, or as “skill”, precisely in order to avoid over-intellectualizing perception.

In *Action in Perception* (Noë 2004, Ch. 6), I defended the view that perception requires the mastery and exercise of concepts. In doing so, I took myself to be lowering the bar on what it is to have a concept, rather than raising the bar on

what it is to be a perceiver. It was always my view that the resulting account was one in which understanding (mastery and use of concepts, including sensorimotor skills) and perception (exploration of the environment drawing on a variety of skills, including concepts, as conventionally understood, and also sensorimotor skills) worked together in human and animal mental life. As I put it later, “understanding” and “perception” arrive at the party together (Noë 2012).

Although actionism places great emphasis in the importance of movement, action, and the body for the theory of perception, on the claim that perceiving is an activity, and on the proposition that perception is not a representation-building activity, it was never the intention of the view to deny the critical role of understanding and knowledge. The point, rather, was to offer a unified account of perception, consciousness, thought, and action. But the details were not entirely worked out. Knowledge, skill, ability, and understanding were not carefully defined, and the precise relation between the account of perception and that of conceptual understanding was not spelled out in detail. I try to rectify that here.

My basic strategy in this paper is as follows. In part I, I offer an extended discussion of what I call intellectualism. I define the view, criticize it, and show how even critics of the view tend to share many of its presuppositions. In part II, I try to offer an alternative to intellectualism, namely concept pluralism, which builds upon the actionist conception of concepts as “skills of access”. Concepts, I propose, should be thought of as techniques for enabling access to what there is. In this way—the details will become clear later on—I offer a way of thinking about concepts that is unified with the basic elements of the earlier theory of perception.

One caveat: I don’t take up the issue of animal experience and cognition in this paper, even though it is directly relevant to the topic.

I

2 Modes of understanding

Kant (1791) said that concepts are predicates of possible judgement. That’s what concepts are.

They are creatures of judgement. He also believed that concepts play a basic role in cognition. They organize the data of sense. Without concepts, sensory experience would be empty sensation; without sensory influx, there’d be nothing for concepts to organize. For Kant, judgement gives the basic form of experience (*Erfahrung*).

Frege (1891) said that concepts are functions from objects to truth-values. In this he appeared to break with Kant. Concepts have nothing to do with judgement or with our cognitive organization. They are before all that. This is in tune with Frege’s well-known anti-psychologism, according to which grasping, understanding, judging, and communicating are of no relevance to logic or ontology.¹ But Frege doesn’t actually sever the link between concepts and judgement; he only frames it differently. Concepts figure in what is judged; they belong to *judgeable content*. So Frege preserves Kant’s link to judgement, but in a de-psychologized version.²

Frege’s anti-psychologism gets him into trouble.³ The fact that concepts are not themselves psychological, in the sense of being ideas or associations or feelings, doesn’t mean that they are not tied to understanding or judgement, for nothing forces us to think of understanding and judgement as psychological in that sense. At the same time, the claim that concepts are “third-realm” entities gives little substance to the idea that they are, in the relevant sense, objective. Finally, if concepts are some sort of occult abstracta, then it isn’t at all clear how we can grasp them. And surely, whatever concepts are, it is the case that we can grasp them.

I’ll return to this set of issues later. But for now let us agree that for both Kant and Frege, concepts are tied to judgement, where this means something like: they are tied to categorizing, to explicit reasoning, to subsuming objects under concepts. Each of these thinkers offers an account of concepts, or of the under-

1 See, for example, Frege’s “Thoughts”, (1918–1919).

2 Not that I mean to suggest that it is right to think of Kant as actually offering a psychological account. But it might look this way from Frege’s perspective.

3 As both Dummett (1973) and Baker & Hacker (1984) have noticed.

standing of concepts, in what I'll call the mode of judgement. According to Kant and Frege, grasp or understanding of concepts finds its natural, true expression in judgement.

This paper takes its start from the observation that there would appear to be other modes of conceptual activity, other ways for understanding (for concepts) to find expression in our lives. At least on the face it, judgement would not seem to be the only mode of conceptual understanding.

Take, for example, *perceptual understanding*, or what we might call *understanding concepts in the perceptual mode*. Consider reading. It is difficult to tell, looking at the entrance to the Taj Mahal, which bits of squiggle are mere ornament, and which are writing in Classical Arabic. You can have this experience, it is available to you, only if you are not fluent in Classical Arabic, or in this style of Arabic script. This marks the spot of the basic phenomenon: there would seem to be a mode of understanding that is perceptual in nature. It is impossible, as a psychological matter, to see meaningful text as a mere squiggle. For the one who knows, for the one who can, meaningful words just show up.

Compare this with the case of a scholar studying Renaissance paintings in which writing is shown embroidered into the robes of magi and other fabulous figures. Are these scripts in a familiar language, or could they be marks from a forgotten one? Or are they *pseudo*-scripts? How do you decide? A keen problem and one that affords opportunity, for it demands reasoning, explicit categorization, and judgement.⁴

But nothing like that seems to be going on when you are reading. And the point is general: it operates at the level of our everyday seeing. It is difficult, maybe even impossible—psychologically speaking—to see familiar kinds of things around us as mere things. We always see them as this or that.

I don't mean that when we see, we *represent* the things we really see around us as this or that, by bringing them under the relevant con-

cepts, by categorizing them, as it were, in judgement. The point rather is that the things we see, the things around us, are familiar, known, comprehended, understood, and recognized, from the very outset. Concepts are geared in before we are even in a position to ask what something is or to make a judgement about it.⁵

So we have here a distinct way in which concepts, or the understanding, can be put to use outside the setting of judgement. Specifically, as I've said, this is an example of the deployment of concepts in the perceptual mode or, more simply, perceptual understanding.

Note, in saying perception is a non-judgemental mode of understanding, I don't mean to deny that there might be an interdependence between the judgemental and the perceptual modes. Maybe only one who can judge can perceive and precisely because perception enables judgement. And maybe it is only of one who can have perceptual experience that we could ever say that he or she is in a position to judge about anything.⁶ My point is that, on the face of it, judging is one thing, and perceiving another, and yet they are both ways of exercising the understanding.

There are other modes, as well.

Concepts also get deployed in what I call the *active mode*; understanding, that is, can find expression, immediately, in what we do. There is such a thing as *practical* understanding. And what makes the relevant understanding practical is not that it is an exercise in judgement on, as it happens, practical matters. What makes it practical, in my view, is that it is the gearing in or putting to work of one's understanding in the absence of any call for, or even space for, reflection or judgement.

The dog walker's knowledge of dogs, for example, is put to work in the way he or she adopts a gait that suits the dog and encourages or permits it to accomplish its sniffy, doggy business; and so also in the way the owner spontaneously shortens the leash as another dog approaches; it is exhibited, even, we might say, in

⁵ As Heidegger (1927) would have put it, the things we encounter are *always already* familiar.

⁶ I return to this issue of the unity of concepts in section 6 below.

⁴ For a discussion of this fascinating topic, see A. Nagel (2011).

the cool she keeps when the two dogs begin barking and straining at their leashes. Without a word, in the absence of deliberation, or explicit thought, the owner knowingly engages the nature of dogs.⁷

And there may be still other kinds of understanding, other *styles* of conceptuality. For example, there is also perhaps what we could call the emotional mode, or maybe it would be better to say the personal, or even *interpersonal* mode. Tears, feeling, injury, but also posture, standing distance to others, navigating in a social environment, can all show a highly refined attunement to situation, relationship, status, goals, tasks, and so on. It takes understanding to do all this, even though we rarely try to make this understanding explicit and even though, very probably, we cannot do this, even in ideal circumstances. Let us say that in this kind of responsive engagement with our social worlds we display understanding.⁸

To summarize: there is a case to be made for the existence of at least three, maybe four, distinct modes of understanding. There is the judgemental mode, the perceptual mode, and the active mode, and perhaps also the personal mode.

3 Intellectualism vs. the intellectualist insight

I have proposed that there are at least three or four distinct modes of understanding. I now turn to the familiar thought that among these varieties of expression of conceptual understanding, only one—the judgemental mode—is genuine. The other modes, according to this idea—that is, the perceptual, the active, the personal

⁷ This example is from [Stephen Mulhall \(1986\)](#).

⁸ With this last example we move beyond description to the suggestion of an argument. The thought is that the relevant forms of understanding couldn't be underwritten by judgement, since we are not able, as a general rule, to frame the needed judgements. Indeed, something like this line of thought is already suggested in the way I've sketched the perceptual and active modes above. Recall the celebrated case of [Oliver Sacks \(1970\)](#): a man can't recognize the item before him as a glove; his powers of judgement are fine—he describes what he sees as a self-enclosed piece of fabric with five outpouchings—and he knows what a glove is. The case is illustrative because it brings out that it is less the fact that he can't recognize the glove, and more the very fact that he needs to think about it all, that brings home the thought that in our normal life there is no room for that sort of deliberation.

—are expressive of understanding only derivatively, thanks to the fact that they are guided or controlled, from outside as it were, by true understanding in the judgemental mode.

I will call this view intellectualism. Intellectualism, as I am defining it, is the view that one modality of conceptual expression is basic, namely, the judgemental, and that the others are domains where understanding finds expression only derivatively.⁹

Plato and Descartes seemed to have believed something like this. For them, a mere sensation rises to the level of perception, and a mere movement to the level of action, only if it is subject to guidance by reason. The soul is divided against itself and it achieves integration only when it is controlled in the right way from above.

Intellectualism is probably the establishment view in cognitive science. When you see the Pole Star, for example, as [Fodor & Pylyshyn \(1981\)](#) insist, you represent whatever it is that you really see—a pattern of irradiation of the retina, perhaps—as the Pole Star. To suppose otherwise is to suppose that vision could be, as [Gibson \(1986\)](#) had claimed, a *direct pick up* of what there is around us. But Pole Starhood, like the third dimension, is not something that gets projected onto the retina. The whatness of things, their nature, no less than the third-dimension itself, are not, strictly speaking, visible. We need judgement, the application of concepts (in this case perhaps automatic and implicit) in the building-up of mental representations, to get something like the world into our experience.¹⁰

Jason Stanley, in a series of writings ([Stanley & Williamson 2001](#); [Stanley 2011](#); [Stanley & Krakauer 2013](#)), defends what I am calling intellectualism. You perform a skilful ac-

⁹ Intellectualism can be defined differently. For a variety of approaches to problems in this vicinity, see [Bengson & Moffett \(2011\)](#).

¹⁰ This was [David Marr's \(1982\)](#) view. The content of visual experience is given in a 2.5D sketch, that is, in a depiction of what is given in the projection of the world onto the retina. It is only in so far as vision yields *knowledge* that it goes beyond what is given in this intermediate-level representation and gives rise to a fully conceptual 3D model. But for Marr, and for his recent advocates ([Prinz 2013](#)), although we live in the world of the 3D sketch, our experience is confined to the intermediate-level representation. And crucially, for these thinkers, you don't need concepts or understanding at the intermediate level. You just need optics.

tion, according to Stanley (2011), only when your action flows from your knowledge of true propositions. He elaborates:

[t]here are all sorts of automatic mechanisms that operate in a genuine sense sub-personally. The human (and animal) capacity for skilled action is based upon these mechanisms. What makes an action an exercise of skill, rather than mere reflex, is the fact that it is guided by the intellectual apprehension of truths. (Stanley 2011, p. 174)

Is intellectualism right? Should we be intellectualists?

It is important that we notice, right away, that intellectualism is right about something. It does justice to the fact that there is understanding, and there is conceptuality, at work wherever we think and perceive and act and talk, as we have been considering. Conceptuality, understanding, and knowledge pervade not only the mental, but our lives and our being. Certainly, it is in evidence wherever we can speak of agency. Stanley insists (in the quotation above) that we can only speak of *skilful* action where there is understanding at work. He perhaps ought to have said that we can only speak of action at all, as opposed to mere reflex, or mere movement, where there is also understanding.

The question I would like us to consider is this: do we need intellectualism to secure this undoubted intellectualist insight, as I will dub the recognition of the pervasiveness of understanding in our perceptual, active, as well as emotional lives? It's crucial that we notice the distance between the insight and the thesis. It's one thing to say that there is understanding at work in perception and action, and another to think that what makes this true is that perception and action are grounded on acts of judgement. Do we need to think that what guarantees and secures the involvement of understanding is the fact that our seeings, doings, and feelings are guided by judgements?

There are, right off the bat, two obvious grounds for suspicion regarding the intellectual-

ist thesis. For one thing, intellectualism at least threatens to obscure the differences to which I have been directing our attention among what at least appear to be authentically distinct ways of exercising one's knowledge and understanding. And so, it seems, it gets things wrong. Seeing and acting and dynamically reacting, most of the time at least, don't look or feel anything like bringing objects under concepts in judgement.

For another, intellectualism smacks of the arbitrary. Couldn't we maintain that perception is the basic form of understanding and that judgement, even in cases of pure reasoning and mathematics, rests on a kind of perceptual insight? Or that it is understanding in the active mode that is truly basic? Judgement itself depends on the mastery and exercise of conceptual capacities which are in the first instance practical. You need to know how to use concepts, after all, in order to use them in judgement.

In any case, let us ask again: are there reasons to endorse intellectualism? Why think that judgement is the primary and singular authentic modality of real understanding? Why be an intellectualist?

4 Troubles with intellectualism

Stanley's writings (Stanley & Williamson 2001; Stanley 2011; Stanley & Krakauer 2013) on the topic are suggestive. However, he seems to mistake evidence in favour of the insight (that understanding is present in perception and action, as well as in the setting of explicit deliberative thought) with support for intellectualism itself (for the view that judgement governs action and perception). And, on top of that, he may commit the fallacy of conceiving the whole genus on the model of one of its species; like thinking that every dog is a cat because, well, they are mammals, or that seeing is a way of touching because, after all, they are both forms of perception. In this case it is the fallacy of thinking that *knowing how* must be a form of *knowing that* because, after all, it is form of knowledge.

Let's turn to this last point first, briefly. Stanley (2011) notices that we use "to know" both for propositional knowledge and also for

practical knowledge (know-how). Contrary to what he suggests, however, there are cognate languages where this is not the case. For example, we don't express knowing how in German using the same verb that we use to express propositional knowledge (Stanley 2011, pp. 36-37). We use *können*, which means *can*; we don't use *wissen* (as in *wissen wie*).

But in any case, the more important point is, *so what?* How dispositive are facts like this supposed to be? It is common ground, I would say, that know-how is a form of knowledge, an achievement of understanding. The question is whether it is a form of knowledge of the same type as propositional knowledge, the sort of knowledge that gets expressed in judgement. Crucially, all the evidence in the world that it is a form of knowledge doesn't add up to evidence that it is propositional knowledge.

Now, as a matter of fact, we know that knowing how to do something is *not* merely knowing that a proposition is true, for any proposition you might care to think up. For knowing how to do something implies that you have the ability to do it (and vice versa), whereas the corresponding propositional knowledge has no such practical entailments.

Stanley would deny this (Stanley & Williamson 2001; Stanley 2011). You can know how to perform a stunt but be unable to perform it (because you've been injured, say); so, he claims, possession of know-how cannot be equivalent to possession of an actual ability. But this is unpersuasive. Of course it is true that you can know how to do something even though you are unable to do it. But this is because your being unable to do it is not, in the relevant sense, evidence that you can't do it! Consider: you can't swim if there's no water, even though you can swim. You can swim but you can't swim. Far from showing that know-how and ability part ways, this sort of consideration reminds us that they move along the same rails.

So knowing how to do something isn't possession of propositional knowledge: it doesn't consist in being in a position to make certain judgements. This is a point that Stanley and Williamson accept, if only implicitly, for they provide a different analysis of the cases precisely

to account for the critical link to action in the case of know-how. Knowing how to do something, on their view, consists in grasping a true proposition, yes, but it consists in grasping it in a distinctively and irreducibly practical way (making use of practical modes of presentation).¹¹

Again, it is worth noticing that to deny, as I do, that knowing how to do something consists in knowing the truth of a proposition, is not to deny that, as a matter of fact, knowing how to do something may put you in a position to make certain judgements, or may require you to appreciate the truth of certain propositions.

This brings us to the first point above: the confusion of evidence for the insight with evidence for the thesis. I am assuming that know-how, like propositional knowledge, is a form of knowledge. This common ground is already secured by the insight: our understanding, our knowledge of concepts, is put to use in both cases. So we can readily agree with Snowdon (2004), cited approvingly by Stanley (Stanley & Williamson 2001), that knowing how and knowing that go together—that where you have one, you have the other. In general, as Snowdon observes, if you know how to do something—say, how to get home from here—then you'll know that all sorts of things are true, such as, for example, *that* you need to turn left here, that you aren't already home, etc. And vice versa. Knowing how and knowing that, in this sense, commingle and cooperate. These considerations are adduced by Stanley, and by Snowdon, I think, to suggest that Ryle was mistaken in believing that the propositional and the practical are disjoint and disconnected (1949); in fact they operate together and in support of each other. This is an important point and one I endorse. And this is exactly what one should expect given the intellectualist insight. After all, understanding operates in both spheres: the practical and the judgemental or propositional. Crucially, however, the fact that the practical and the propos-

¹¹ Stanley (2011) offers a different account from that developed in Stanley & Williamson (2001). The former is framed in terms of modal parameters governing the interpretation of the relevant sentences. Although he insists that know-how does not entail ability, he admits that attributions of know-how exhibit more or less the same sort of modality as ascriptions of dispositions and abilities.

itional mutually entail each other in this sort of way lends no support to the intellectualist idea that one of these, the propositional, is foundational in respect of the other; indeed, it weighs against that very idea. Why press on and insist on this thesis when, it would seem, the insight on its own is enough to capture the phenomenon at hand?

Stanley's motivations seem fairly clear. He wants to break with the idea that propositional knowledge is detached and, as he puts it, behaviourally inert. He wants to insist that it's wrongheaded to think that athletes and clowns and craftspeople are skilful zombies, whereas philosophers and mathematicians and physicists are *intellectual* workers whose actions exhibit authentic brain-power. It may be, even, that he thinks this is a point of political significance.

Intellectualism isn't necessary to secure any of this, however. The insight has already done that.

In fact, intellectualism, as Stanley develops it, threatens to distort the nature of the cognitive achievements that are put to work in our practical, perceptual, and personal engagements. This comes out in the discussion of skill. Stanley & Krakauer (2013) defend Aristotle's claim (from *Metaphysics* 1046b) that we can only speak of *skilful action*, as opposed to mere habit, or brute capacities, where we can speak of *rational control* of action, and also where we can speak of teaching, learning, practicing, getting better, or achieving expertise. They defend Aristotle's claim that it is a mark of skilfulness, that you can voluntarily choose to perform what you can do skilfully *badly*.

This last point seems unlikely. I can't choose not to understand what you say, or to see writing as mere squiggles, or words as composed of bits I need painstakingly to sound or spell out. A guitarist cannot choose to experience the instrument in his hands as strange or unfamiliar. At best, maybe, I can pretend I am unable to do these things.

Is this because talking and reading and playing guitar are not really skilful at all, that they are mere habits outside the range of rational control? Hardly! They're expressions of skilful competence, rational understanding and

knowledge if anything is. The mistake is to think that a performance is only rational if control is exerted in the mode of judgement, as if from outside. The understanding that is put to work in our talk and play, as in our thought, is native to these various styles of engagements themselves.

Stanley and Krakauer make a lot of the demand that skill depends on knowledge of facts. It's worth noticing, yet again, that insisting, as I do, that skilfulness does not consist in the *exercise of concepts in the judgemental mode* does not entail that there can be skilfulness in the absence of the ability to exercise them in that mode. It may be, as a matter of fact—this is related to the Snowdon point above—that only someone who is sensitive to all sorts of facts, for example, about how something is done, will in fact know how to do it. This doesn't show that knowing how is a kind of knowledge of the facts. It shows rather that our distinct conceptual capacities may be interdependent.

Stanley and Krakauer try to draw a line between true skills, which are, in their sense, governed by rationality, and others—for example perceptual and linguistic skills—that are too basic, or too simple to qualify as skills in the fuller rational sense.¹²

One problem with this suggestion is that it is not so easy to draw a sharp line between skills and supposedly brute abilities. Take colour vision, for example, which is innate in humans. Despite this, it turns out that children find it very difficult to recognize and discriminate colours long after they've mastered the names of familiar objects, people, games, etc. As Akins (unpublished manuscript) has argued, this is probably because colours are not simple, as our phenomenology, or rather, our conventional wisdom about our phenomenology, leads us erroneously to believe. *Getting* blue or yellow or red is to develop a sensitivity to suites of constancies and variations—to ecological variation in what I have called *colour-critical condi-*

¹² Stanley & Krakauer (2013, p. 5) write: “[b]ut at some point, all such knowledge will rest on knowledge of basic actions, such as grasping an object or lifting one's arm. These activities are not skills; they are not acquired by or improved upon by raining in adult life. Their manifestation is nevertheless under our voluntary control.”

tions—that takes time and learning, and allows for criticism and reflection. Is colour vision basic? Or is it skilful? It may be both.

This is not a special case. Because seeing is saturated with understanding, it is very hard to find features of our ability that are not modulated by knowledge and context. Granted, the ability to discriminate line-gratings of different densities is fixed, at its limit, by the resolving powers of the eyes; yet our discriminations are likely to be sensitive to task and motivation, to attention and distraction—that is, very broadly, to our engagement with the meaningful world. So where does skill stop and brute ability begin? I am skeptical that learnability, teachability, or rational control provide an interesting or valuable demarcation. The most basic reason for this is that perceiving is never merely registration. It is a matter of knowledgable access (Noë 2004, 2012).

There is a second important issue as well. Consider language. Linguistic misunderstanding doesn't stop language in its tracks, ejecting you and sending you back to the grammar, written, as it were in advance, by those responsible for setting up the language. Rather, coping with misunderstanding—dealing with not getting how someone is using words, or how we should use them, or with not knowing how to use them—is one of language's familiar settings. We adjudicate and teach and learn and improve and criticize and define and formalize and evaluate *within* language, not from outside it. Language, contrary to the claims of Chomskyan linguistics, is not a rule-governed activity. It is a rule-using activity. And we make up the rules as we need them and for our own purposes. This may be controversial. But here's why I insist on it: according to the logician's or the linguist's picture of language, first you assign values to primitives, then you set up rules governing the construction of well-formed formulas. If you think of language this way, then it looks like you need judgement—the application of rules to cases—to secure the meaningfulness of what would otherwise be mere marks and noises. But we don't need judgement—we don't need understanding in the judgemental mode—to secure meaning. We don't need guidance from the outside.

The opposition between habit and skill is a false one; and it is a mistake to think that what marks the opposition is that habit is below or before understanding whereas skill is the deliberate exercise of understanding.

5 Troubles with anti-intellectualism

Some critics of intellectualism argue that perception cannot be conceptual, because if perception were conceptual, then perception would be a form of judgement. But the idea that perception is judgement over-intellectualizes perception.¹³

This is how I understand Gareth Evan's (1982) argument in connection with the Müller-Lyer illusion. You can experience the two lines in the Müller-Lyer illusion as different in length, even when you know, and so have not the even the weakest inclination to deny, that the lines are the same in length. The visual experience is one thing, and judgement another; hence experience is not conceptual.

Now, this is an example of an apparent disagreement between what you know to be the case (judgement) and how things look (experience). Things look precisely the way you know they are not. Experience and the judgement are in conflict. This shows, I would have thought, that experience, and the corresponding content, share the same kind of content. The fact that they are in apparent conflict shows that they are not somehow incommensurable. So if the one is conceptual, then so is the other.

But more important, for our discussion here, is that Evans seems to assume that concepts can only be in play if they are applied in judgement. Since experience is not judgement, there is no way for concepts to gear in. But that's to accept the basic claim of the intellectualist—judgement is the only way for concepts to get into the act—not to challenge it.

So Evans' argument against the idea that perceptual experience is conceptual—what we can think of as Evans's anti-intellectualism—actually takes what I am calling intellectualism

¹³ See Noë (2004, Ch. 6) for detailed engagement with the issue of the conceptuality of perception and the relation between my own position and that of John McDowell.

for granted. It takes for granted that there is only one genuine and legitimate mode of exercise of conceptual understanding, namely the judgemental.

Hubert Dreyfus (e.g., 2013) is responsible for a widely-influential criticism of intellectualism that is *crypto-intellectualist* in just this way.

Reasons, principles, and explicit knowledge guide perception and activity, according to Dreyfus, but only in the case of the novice. The expert, in contrast, is one who is engaged, in the flow. The expert, having mastered the rules and the concepts, has no further use for them. The expert is able to respond to the solicitations of situation and environment with no need for conscious thought or deliberate judgement.

A favourite example is that of the lightning chess player. There is literally no time, claims Dreyfus, for the chess player to analyse the situation and decide how to move. Moves are made in a flash. To suppose that the move is guided by reasons or judgement is to fall prey to a *myth of the mental*, according to which a mind-faculty, a faculty of judgement, say, accompanies our doings and is responsible for them being expressive of competence, intelligence, and understanding. For Dreyfus this idea is a dead giveaway of a distinct type of intellectualist psychologism. Yes, Dreyfus grants, if you ask the expert afterwards, why he or she made this move and not that one, he can give you a reason. But we have no more ground to suppose the reason was in operation before the player switched into the intellectual mode in response to the question than we do to suppose that the refrigerator light is always on because it is on whenever you open the fridge to look.

According to Dreyfus, understanding or reason operate only if there are explicit acts of rule-following, or judgement, that accompany, or even precede, every act. But why believe that? The baseball player doesn't need to be thinking about the rules for it to be the case that what he does is subject to them and is carried out, so to speak, in their light. The rules are there—in the form of umpires and rule books, and also dictionaries and courts of law, and earnest disagreement among participants—and we have access to them as need arises. The

fact that we can use them, and that we care about their correct use, is all that is needed for it to be the case that we act under their influence. The influence is not causal. It is normative.

Dreyfus goes further and insists that whether or not it is always legitimate to demand that *the phronesis*, as he calls the expert, invoking Aristotle, justifies his or her actions, it will not in general be possible for him or her to do so. You can't make explicit the myriad rules governing how we stand or react or explore or decide because, as a matter of fact, there are no such general rules. There is nothing to be made explicit. At best the chess master is likely to point to the situation on the board and exclaim, *look! This situation requires this move!*

But why is not this exactly the kind of reply that is required? Recall Wittgenstein's (1953, §88) example of "Stand over there!" This can be a perfectly precise command, as exact as rationality can require, even when it is not the case that one can specify, to the millimetre, say, where it is one is supposed to stand. For certain purposes, in certain contexts, one may need more precision. But in other contexts the demand for precision on the order of millimetres would be unreasonable. And so my thought here is that it is to set too high a standard on what it would be to have a reason for acting to demand that one can frame it independently of the situation one is in. It is precisely an over-intellectualized conception of what it would be to have a reason, or to make use of a rule, to suppose that rules and reasons need to be context-free and situation-independent, known in advance and applied, as it were, from outside one's engaged play¹⁴—just as it would be to over-intellectualize the intellect in general to suppose that concepts only gear in in the setting of judgement.

Here's the point: the use of rules themselves—which for Dreyfus is the hallmark of the detached attitude of the intellect—is itself an activity that admits of mastery and expertise and so also flow. And so we cannot insist that rule-use marks the boundary between engagement and detachment.

¹⁴ See McDowell (1994). His discussion of demonstrative senses and demonstrative concepts aims at just this point.

But once we allow that rules are used, and reasons proffered, from the standpoint of our engagement—from the inside—, then we need not fear that we have committed ourselves to an over-intellectualized conception of what it is to be engaged, just because we allow that we understand and can reflect on what we are doing.

Notice again that Dreyfus's picture—a picture he may take over from Heidegger (1927) and Merleau-Ponty (1945)—only counts as evidence against the idea that concepts and reasons and rules gear into perception and skilled action if we suppose that the intellectualist is right, that there is only one way for understanding to get into the act—namely, in the form of explicit deliberate judgement.

And notice that this way of rejecting intellectualism—on the part of Dreyfus, and other existential phenomenologists, and perhaps also Evans—pays a high price. For it must reject the idea that understanding and reason have any place at all outside the range of explicit deliberative reason, and so it has to give up the intellectualist's insight, namely that in our engaged, perceptual, and active lives, even when we are experts, even when we are skilled, our performance gives expression to knowledge, intelligence, and understanding. By accepting the intellectualist thesis that judgement alone is the only true way for concepts to gear in, Dreyfus and co. feel they are compelled to reject the idea that our lives as a whole, beyond the confines of deliberate exercise of reason and understanding, can be, or are, at one with our intellects.

What existential phenomenology may find difficult to appreciate—at least in Dreyfus's version of the position—is that conflict, disagreement, and disturbance of flow are themselves business-as-usual; they are normal moments in the way that even the expert carries on. We saw this in the language case. Expertise is not immunity; if anything, it is an evolved opportunity for new forms of vulnerability. Engagement is, as I shall put it, always manifestly *fragile*. That is, the liability to slip up, to get things wrong, is a built into the nature of the undertaking—of *any* undertaking. To go wrong is not, as a general rule, to stop playing the game—it is not the game's abeyance—it is rather a moment in

the development of play. But let's go back to language. We don't stop communicating when we fail to understand each other. At least that is not usually the case. Misunderstanding is an opportunity for more communication. Clarifying, reformulating, trying again, like criticism, are things we use language to do. The fragility is intrinsic and manifest. It doesn't mark out the game's limits. It marks one of its modalities.

I stated earlier that understanding in the active and perceptual modes leaves no room for the application of understanding in the judgemental mode. I suggested this was a reason for thinking that judgement can't be operating behind the scenes when we perceive and act. But we can amend this now in light of our consideration of fragility. It is internal to the very character of our perceptual and active involvements that they are liable, not so much to breakdown, in Dreyfus's sense, as to error, confusion, and other stutter-steps that require precisely that one now *think* about what one is seeing and what one is doing. Judgement and thought can, in this sense, live cheek-by-jowl with perception and action without, therefore, getting in their way.

In any case, Dreyfus's criticism of intellectualism fails. But it does so precisely because he fails to break with the over-intellectualized conception of the intellect at the heart of intellectualism. Dreyfus's anti-intellectualism fails because intellectualism fails. It is, in reality, a species of intellectualism. Neither Dreyfus, nor his would-be opponent, can do justice to the ways in which understanding operates outside the narrow domain of explicit reasoning. Both sides fail to accommodate the phenomenon of fragility.

II

6 Concept pluralism: A genuine alternative to intellectualism

So let us now turn our attention to the prospects for framing a true alternative to intellectualism. What would such an alternative look like?

A genuine alternative to intellectualism will be pluralist in that it will reckon that there

are different legitimate and non-derivative modes of understanding, and so it will hold fast to the intellectualist's insight that understanding is in play everywhere in our lives even as it rejects the intellectualist thesis.

One resource for such a pluralism is Wittgenstein (1953). Wittgenstein proposed that a concept is a technique, and that understanding, therefore, is a form of mastery, akin to an ability. An important fact about abilities is that they can be exercised in a multiplicity of ways. I can exercise my understanding of what a house is by building one, looking at one, painting one, living in one, talking about one, or buying one. So, from this standpoint, there is nothing more surprising about the fact that my knowledge can find expression in what I do, as well as in my knowledge of a proposition, than there is in the fact that my ability to read gets exercised both when I read a novel and also when I blush at the words on the bathroom wall.

This idea also helps us explain the unity of understanding. If concepts can be applied in walking the dog as well as in writing a treatise about dogs, what is the connection between these two self-standing and non-derivative modes of exercise of something that, surely, is a single conceptual capacity: an understanding of the concept *dog*? What gives unity to this understanding?

The idea that understanding a concept is mastery of a technique, a mastery that has multiple, distinct, context-sensitive ways of finding expression, helps here. One way to express understanding of *dog* is to talk and write about dogs. Another way is to be able to spot dogs on the basis of their appearance. Still another is to work or play comfortably with dogs. And the list goes on and on. We put our singular understanding of what dogs are to work in these different ways, and the understanding consists in the ability to do (more or less) all of that.

We are now in a position to appreciate that the claim that perception and action are, with judgement, non-derivative, original modes of understanding does not entail that these modes are independent of each other. The idea that the unity of a concept is a matter of unity-in-ability helps bring this out. The fact that

perception isn't beholden to judgement for its conceptuality doesn't mean that there could be perception in the absence of capacities for judgement. After all, typically, you can't be said to know a concept if you can't apply it in normal perceptual settings. Can you know what a tomato is if you are incapable of any active or perceptual engagement with tomatoes?

But we should also be careful. In so far as our concepts have unproblematic unity, then, on this Wittgensteinian view, this is because they are exercises of common abilities—abilities which are, of their nature, such as to admit a genuine multiplicity of expressions. But the unity of our concepts is not something that we can always take for granted.

Is there *one* concept of dog, or several, brought to life in different situations and sub-cultures at different times, for different purposes? Is there unity or just fragmentation? Is this a shared understanding? These are important questions, not for philosophy, particularly, but for culture. Look at the changes that have taken place in our thinking about *matter* over the last few hundred years. Or, to give a different kind of example, about *gender*. We have no choice but to work it out as we go along.

And crucially, there is no standpoint outside our thinking, talking, writing, persuading, imposing, regulating, prescribing and also describing, from which these questions can be adjudicated. This doesn't make the existence of dogs a matter of social construction. (Of course, dogs are, literally, bred and so constructed by us.) No, surely dogs have a mind-independent nature. But it does mean that it is hard and creative and unending work to bring that reality into focus in our shared thought, talk, perception, and activity.

There is no standpoint outside our thoughtful practices from which to ask after our own concepts. For our concepts are our own tools and techniques. This is where Frege went wrong. He seems to have thought that the only way to achieve *objectivity*—that is, sharability, articulability, and lawfulness—was by supposing concepts were out there, indifferent to how we grasp or understand them. In fact, they supervene on our grasping, negotiating, communicat-

ive activity. Frege made no allowance for fragility.

7 Concepts are skills of access

But can we say more than just that concepts are abilities? Abilities to do what? Well, we've already said: to talk and see and use and judge, and so on.

But I think we can do better. To do so, I draw on the actionist approach to perception developed in earlier work (Noë 2004, 2012). To begin to organise an answer, consider two familiar facts about visual perception. The first is that, as Euclid noticed, when a solid opaque object is seen, it is never seen in its entirety at once. Things always have hidden parts. The second is that the visible world is cluttered with all manner of stuff. Things get in the way, the view is interrupted, occlusion is the norm.

And yet, despite these striking limitations, we don't experience the world as cut off from us, inaccessible to vision, blocked from perception. The partial, fragmentary, and perspective-bound character of our visual access to the world is not a limit on what we see, a marking off of our liability to blindness; it is, rather, the very manner of our seeing. This is fragility again.

Not seeing through the solid and opaque, as if it were transparent, is not a perceptual failing but rather an accomplishment. And relatedly: we belong to the cluttered environment ourselves. We are not confined to what is projected to a point. We explore. And it is that exploring, that doing, that is the seeing. The seeing is not the occurrence of a picture or representation in the head; it is, rather, the securing of comprehending access, thanks to our possession of a specific repertoire of skills, to what there is. The generic modality of the way the world shows up in perception is not *as represented*, but rather *as accessible* (as I argue in Noë 2012). This is why our inability to see things from all sides at once, or to experience a thing's colour in all possible lighting conditions at once, is no obstacle to the presence of whole objects and colours in our experience.

The immediate environment is present in visual perception, not because it projects to the eyes, but because the person, by means of the use of his or her eyes as well as other forms of movement and negotiation, has access to that environment. Presence is availability, and its modalities—visual as opposed to tactual, for example—are fixed by the things we need to do, the negotiations, to bring and keep what is there in reach. Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus* (1921), said that the eye is a limit of the visual field. But this is wrong: the adjustments of the eye, the need to adjust the eye, difficulties in adjusting the eye, are given in the way we see. Wittgenstein's point, I suppose, was that the eye doesn't see itself seeing (unless you look in a mirror). But here's a different model: seeing is like what an outfielder does. To say that the eye is not *in* the visual field is a bit like saying that the body of the outfielder is not in the field of play. But in fact the eye and the head and the hand and the arm and the glove are all in the field of play. And what we call *fielding the play* is precisely a temporally extended transaction in that whole environment. And the basis of the environment's availability to this or that modality of exploration, beyond the fact that it is there, is our possession of the skills, abilities, and capacities to secure our access to it. The occluded portions of the things we see are there for us, present to us, thanks to our skilful ability to move and bring them into view. Perception is fragile.

John Campbell, writing in a related context (2002), has said that we shouldn't think of the brain as representing the world; we should think of it as making the adjustments that, as he puts it, keep the pane of glass between you and the world clean and clear, as if it were continuously vulnerable to becoming opaque.

My thought is that *we* (not our brains) need continuously to make adjustments to keep the world in view, and to maintain our access to the world around us.

But I add: the character of the world's presence itself is precisely a function not only of what there is, but of what we know how to do, and what we do, and what we must always of necessity stand ready to do, just in case, to pre-

serve our access. You need to squint and peer and adjust to see things far away; and this makes a difference to how those things show up.

This is one reason why it is a mistake to suppose that we think of the adjustments that belong to the ways we bring the world into focus as the brain's work. No, it is our work, even if most of it is low-level, unattended, and done automatically. For it is this work that gives experience the quality that it has.

The scene is present for us in the manner of a field of play. This is a fragile presence. Its presence is not given to us alone thanks to what might happen in our brains, thanks to neural events triggered by optical events. Its presence is achieved thanks to what we know how to do. The basis of our skilful access to the world is, precisely, our possession of *skills of access*.

And this, finally, is what I propose concepts are. They are skills of access, or rather, a species of such. They are not so much devices by which we make the world intelligible, as much as they are the techniques by which we secure our contact with the world, in whatever modality. From this point of view, concepts like *dog* and *matter* are of a piece with other skills of access such as the not-quite-articulable sensorimotor skills we skilfully deploy as we navigate the scene with our thinking bodies.

From this standpoint, it is worth emphasizing that there is no theoretically interesting cleavage between seeing and thinking (as already argued in Noë 2012). Seeing is thoughtful and thought is perceptual at least in so far as it is, like seeing, a skilful negotiation with what there is, as just another modality of our environment-involving transactions. Presence, after all, is always in a modality—that is, it is always dependant on our repertoire of skills. And it is always a matter of degree. The hidden portions of the things we see *show up for us*, as does the space behind our head, and even spaces further afield. We have access—skill-based, partial, perspective-bound, and fragmentary—to it all.

Perception and thought, from the actionist perspective, differ as sight and touch differ. They are different *styles* of access to the world around us.

8 We use concepts to take hold of things, not to represent them

Let us come back to the more particular line of investigation that has been our concern.

The intellectualist is quite right that in so far as seeing is expressive of understanding, this is because we bring concepts to bear in our seeing. But the intellectualist is mistaken in holding that this is because we categorize what we see, in the mode of judgement, by applying concepts. It is rather that we see *with* concepts. Concepts are techniques by which we take hold and secure access. Their job is not to represent what is there; their job is to enable what is there to be present to us. You can't see the laser-projector if you don't know what a laser-projector is. Your possession of the concept is a condition on the laser-projector's showing up for you. It is the ability that lets you encounter what is in fact there.

Back to the example of text: your grasp of the relevant concepts enables you to read (to see what is there). Not because it gives you the resources to interpret or decode (although it does give you that). But because knowledge lets what might otherwise be unseen come into view. Knowledge can also, correspondingly, disable us. Your reading knowledge, for example, can make it difficult or even impossible to see the squiggles, the “mere marks”, which are also always there whenever you read.

And so across the board: we don't apply concepts in judgement to what we see in order to represent things; our possession of the concepts is what enables us to make contact with them themselves. We see *with* our concepts. They are themselves techniques or means for handling what there is. Think of the concept in perception not as a category, or a representation, but a way of *directly picking up* what is there (to re-use and rehabilitate Gibson's 1986 idea).

And so also for the active modality. My understanding gets expressed in what I *do* and it gets expressed directly—for example, I exercise my knowledge of teacups in the *way* I handle this cup; I grasp the cup with my hands, and also with my understanding. My under-

standing gets put to work in the fact that I am able to do this, in the fact that I know how to do it.

Understanding, I would urge, is put to work, in these doings, *directly*. We don't need to suppose an action is skilful or knowledgeable or expressive of understanding only when it is guided, as it were from without, by propositional knowledge—as if the understanding couldn't inform our practical knowledge and our action directly.

And we are now finally in a position to understand why this is the case: for then we would be owed an account of how understanding is put to work in judgement. And here, we are just thrown back on what we can do to bring what is there for us into focus, to achieve its presence.

9 Conclusion: The significance of fragility

The world shows up for us in perception and thought, but it has a fragile presence. It shows up in very much in the same way that what a person means shows up for us when we are in conversation, to return to the language example. Misunderstanding, outright failure to understand, are always manifestly live possibilities. It isn't only solid opaque objects that fail to reveal themselves in their totality to the single glance. What we are given, always, is an opportunity or affordance for further effort, engagement, negotiation, and skilful transaction. The world is present to thought and perception not as a represented totality—an idea in our minds, a representation in our brains—but as the place in which we find ourselves, where we live, where we work. The world is a big place, and so there is a lot for us to do if we are to secure our footing on its slippery grounds. But a slippery ground is still a ground, and we need to secure our footing.

Presence—in thought and experience—is fragile, in other words. Philosophy has been strangely resistant to fragility. Fragility is not fallibility. The point about fragility is that it is manifest. An object's colour shows up for us as something with hidden aspects; it presents itself

to us as something that is always on the cusp of variation, always ready to change with the least alteration in our perspective or in the conditions of viewing. A colour, no less than a solid object, has hidden aspects. We don't experience these aspects as isolated atoms—as if we were confined to what the camera sees. What we see, what we experience, outstrips anything that can be understood in optical terms alone. For we see, we experience, and we also think about, a world that manifestly goes beyond what can be taken in a glance. Our skills—our understanding, to use the term that has organised so much of this discussion—gives us access to what there is.

That access is achieved, but not once and for all. It is not as though we consume the world in encountering it so that now we can make do with what is inside us. Access is a work in process. Presence is fragile, manifestly so; but it is robust.

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The Fragile Nature of the Social Mind

A Commentary on Alva Noë

Miriam Kyselo

In this paper I argue that while Noë's actionist approach offers an excellent elaboration of classical approaches to conceptual understanding, it risks underestimating the role of social interactions and relations. Noë's approach entails a form of body-based individualism according to which understanding is something the mind does all by itself. I propose that we adopt a stronger perspective on the role of sociality and consider the human mind in terms of socially enacted autonomy. On this view, the mind depends constitutively on engaging with and relating to others. As a consequence, conceptual understanding must be seen as a co-achievement. It is a fragile endeavour precisely because it depends not only on the individual but also on the continuous contribution of other subjects.

Keywords

Body-social problem | Enactive self | Fragility | Socially enacted autonomy | Socially extended mind

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1 Introduction

In the paper “Concept Pluralism, Direct Perception, and the Fragility of Presence” Alva Noë offers an exciting and dense insight into his philosophical thinking. Combining his classical work on the active nature of perception (Noë 2004) with his more recent inquiries into philosophical method, presence, the arts, and human nature in general, Noë now aims at a more thorough account of conceptual understanding (2012).

Noë's proposal must be seen in light of the paradigm shift in the philosophy of mind and cognition, from a cognitivist and representationalist view to a distributed or embodied per-

spective on the mind. It is one of the so-called “E-approaches” to the mind (enactive, extended, embodied and embedded) that transcend the classical view of the mind as being an isolated entity located in the brain that passively represents an outside and independently-given world (e.g., Shapiro 2011; Clark & Chalmers 1998; Noë 2004; Varela et al. 1993; Thompson 2007; Kyselo 2013). There are significant differences between these views (and they will be of relevance below), but generally speaking they all rest on the assumption that cognition is not in the head and instead requires bodily action and the environment. Noë uses these insights

from the E-approaches to expand on the disembodied and representationalist view underlying the intellectualist approach to concepts, and in this way, he provides a timely and innovative elaboration of conceptual understanding that is more encompassing than previous approaches.

I am sympathetic to Noë's approach. Methodologically speaking, he illustrates what he promotes as the right style of philosophical analysis, an inquiry into the so-called "third-realm" that remains "in-between—neither entirely objective nor merely subjective" (Noë 2012, p. 136) but open for "conversation or dialogue" (Noë 2012, p. 138). My comment should be considered an elaboration in the same vein.

I agree with Noë with regards to the more general project of questioning traditional conceptions in philosophy of mind by adopting an embodied and distributed perspective. That said, however, I think that there is a problem with his proposal. Even though it provides a great number of important insights, I think, third-realm fashion, Noë's proposal fails as a general theory of understanding. The reason for this is that in a crucial way his own epistemological pre-conception of mind is not yet fully separated from the paradigm that it seeks to overcome: while Noë acknowledges the role of the bodily and active individual, he accepts a dichotomy that is prevalent in the traditional paradigm, namely the split between the individual and the world of others. His approach inherits what I have called the *body-social* problem (Kyselo & Di Paolo 2013; Kyselo 2014). The body-social problem is the third in a series of dichotomies in the philosophy of mind and the successor to the classical mind-body problem and the more recent body-body problem (Thompson 2007). The body-body problem is the question of how the bodily subject can be at once subjectively lived and an organismic body that is embedded in the world. The body-social problem elaborates on this and is concerned with the question of how bodily and social aspects figure in the individuation of the human individual mind. Philosophers of cognition systematically assume that the mind is essentially embodied, while the social world remains the context in which the embodied mind

is embedded. On this view, the social arguably shapes the mind, but it does not figure in the constitution of the mind itself.

In what follows, I first show that Noë's proposal entails the same presupposition and thus invites a new form of methodological individualism that risks limiting conceptual understanding to the endeavour of an isolated individual subject. I then introduce and discuss an alternative proposal for a model of the individual mind as a *socially enacted self*. I argue that since the world of humans is a world of others and our social relations are what matters most to us, the social must also figure in the constitutive structure of human cognitive individuation.¹ The human mind or self is not only embodied but also genuinely social. From an enactive viewpoint the self can be considered as a self-other generated autonomous system, whose network identity is brought forth through individual's engagement in bodily-mediated social interaction processes of *distinction and participation*. Distinction and participation refer to the two intrinsic goals that the individual follows and needs to balance. Distinction means to be able to exist as individual in one's own right. Participation refers to an openness to others and a readiness to be affected by them. It refers to the sense of self as connected and participating. Both goals are achieved through engaging and relating to others. The processes that constitute the identity of the human mind are therefore not defined in terms of bodily but rather interpersonal relations and interactions. On this enactive approach to the self, the body is not equated with the self but instead seen as that which grounds a double sense of self as a separated identity and as participating. The body mediates the individual's interactions with others (Kyselo 2014).

I outline how the model of the socially enacted self can combine with and elaborate Noë's actionist account of concepts so as to arrive at an even more encompassing view of human un-

1 By saying that sociality matters *constitutively* for the human self, I mean that without continuously relating and engaging in interactions with others, there would be no human self as a whole. The social is not only causally relevant for enacting selfhood, but it is also an essential component of its minimal organisational structure.

derstanding as well as a deeper appreciation of its fragile nature.

2 The risk of crypto-individualism

Noë observes a dichotomy between what he calls the *intellectualist* approach to concepts, the view that concepts are judgments, which is endorsed by Kant and Frege, and the *existential phenomenological* approach, such as that endorsed by Dreyfus, which argues that concepts are usually only used by the novice, and that understanding is otherwise already given through context and situation.² Noë disagrees with both positions. He rejects the idea that concepts are only judgments, fixed and just “out there”, to help us represent the world; yet contrary to the *anti-intellectualists*, Noë also emphasizes that conceptual understanding is not limited to the novice, but “at work wherever we think and perceive and act and talk”. What the existential phenomenologist thereby misses, according to Noë, is that skillful mastery involves learning and development. Noë assumes that, like intellectualism, anti-intellectualism makes the presupposition that concepts are equal to judgments and thus implicitly reduces the mind to a “realm of detached contemplation” (2012, p. 25). For that reason, Noë calls anti-intellectualism *crypto-intellectualist*.

Noë seeks to find an alternative to the two positions by questioning their very fundamentals. Rather than assuming that the world is just given and that everything is already present to us, Noë emphasizes the active contribution of the individual organism (2004, 2009). He proposes that we should adopt a pluralistic approach to concepts, according to which conceptual understanding is basically having the skills required for accessing the world. There are different types or modes of access to the world, including the modes of perception and action, the (inter)personal, and the emotional mode. On this *pluralistic* account, thinking and perceiving

are not very different from one another. Both are “a skillful negotiation with what there is, just another modality of our environment-involving transactions” (Noë [this collection](#), p. 16). From this perspective, judgements belong to a particular mode of access and form part of a broader set of skills of conceptual understanding. Noë then specifies the nature of our access to the world. The world is not just out there ready to be understood. Rather, it always has to be made available and actively brought into view or into “presence”, as Noë puts it. Concepts are the means by which we can achieve this. They are the techniques “by which we secure our contact” with the world (*ibid.*). But bringing the world into presence is not a fixed, one-time or uni-directional endeavour. Conceptual understanding involves continuous engagement with the world; it can change and also fail. Noë proposes the notion of *fragility* as a key for understanding conceptual activity as an open and necessarily vulnerable phenomenon, instead of a perfect application of definite representations of the world. In this way, he overcomes the limited view of both the intellectualist and anti-intellectualist perspectives according to which concepts are judgments about an independent world.

One of Noë’s crucial insights is that the traditional dichotomy between an objectively given world and subjectively experienced, internally-processed data about worldly objects can be overcome by grounding all conceptual activity in a broader “common genus”, i.e., skillful engagement with the world. But what is even more important, and in this I think Noë does not actually diverge far from Dreyfus and other existential phenomenologists, is that the established unity of different modes of understanding is not merely a unity in terms of styles of access to the world, but also a unity grounded in the *individual* mind as a whole. But what is that individual mind as whole?

Noë quite clearly presupposes that *we* are not our brains. We understand the world through navigating it with our thinking, skillful sensorimotor body (Noë [this collection](#), 2004). This view breaks with the cognitivist paradigm with regard to the constitutive elements of the

² The existential phenomenological approach refers to phenomenologists such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty who investigate the basic structures of human existence. One of their assumptions is that prior to any reflexive understanding, we are already attuned to the world simply through our bodily being in it. Dreyfus calls this pre-reflexive attunement to the world “absorbed coping” (2013, p. 21).

system that does the understanding, and it also breaks with it with regard to the relation of the understanding system to the environment: the system is not passive, but rather active and dynamical. What this elaboration implies, yet does not make explicit, is the fact that conceptual activity is done by a bodily *agent* who understands or has access to the world. After all, conceptual understanding is not just understanding *about* something but always also understanding *for* someone and *by* someone. To argue that thought and perception are unified as modes of access thus presupposes an individual who employs these different modes of access, someone for whom the world can show up. Without an agent that does the understanding, postulating a unification of modes of understanding would not make any sense, as any understanding would remain an action that has neither origin nor actor.

This is a point that [Evan Thompson](#), who is also a proponent of embodied cognition, has already made on some of Noë's earlier work on enactive perception (2007). According to Thompson, while emphasising the role of experiences of *objects*, Noë underestimates the role of subjectivity as such: the “sensorimotor approach needs a notion of selfhood or agency, because to explain perceptual experience it appeals to sensorimotor knowledge. Knowledge implies a knower or agent or self that embodies this knowledge” (Thompson 2007, p. 260). This is where I think Noë's underlying epistemology requires elaboration. Who or what is the individual subject that engages in this fragile endeavour of securing access to the world?

[Thompson](#) provides an insight that can be seen as a major step into the right direction: he proposes addressing the *body-body problem*, i.e., the question of how the agent can be at once subjectively lived and an organismic or sensorimotor body that is embedded in the world (2007, pp. 235–237), by proposing an enactive notion of selfhood. According to this notion, individual agency is defined in terms of *autonomy*. It is seen as a self-organised network of interconnected processes that produce and sustain themselves as a systemic whole—a bounded identity within a particular domain

(Varela 1997; Maturana & Varela 1987). According to [Thompson](#), it is this autonomous self that gives unity to the sensorimotor skills in terms of self-organisation and operational closure (2005, 2007). Operational closure means that some process relations of the autonomous network remain constant despite structural dependence on the environment, i.e., each process within the network is not only enabling but also enabled by some other process. With the production of such a self-organised autonomous identity the individual also acquires a basic subjective perspective, from which interactions with the world are evaluated respectively. This subjective perspective is what [Thompson](#) calls a pre-reflective bodily self-consciousness (2007, p. 261).

On Thompson's enactive account, the individual is now not only active and embodied but also an autonomous subjective agent. Importantly however, Thompson shares with Noë a dubious fundamental pre-supposition, namely the idea that the individual mind or subject can be equated with the individual sensorimotor body or organism. The autonomous agent is a self-organised “sensorimotor selfhood” ([Thompson 2005](#), p. 10). As a consequence, in both Thompson and Noë's views, the mind is empowered and freed, as it is no longer restricted to the passive, information-consuming existence that is distant to the world and confined to the narrow shells of our heads. Nevertheless, it still remains a mind of a body in isolation: in isolation from the world of others.³ This risk of an individualist account of the agent is the first horn of a dilemma underlying Noë's proposal. The second horn has to do with the fact that for Noë understanding is actually *not* an isolated endeavour. The social world is mentioned

3 [Thompson](#) clearly recognises the importance of intersubjectivity for the process of understanding, arguing that “human subjectivity is from the outset intersubjectivity, and no mind is an island” (2007, p. 383). He proposes (in line with Husserl) that humans are from the beginning intersubjectively open. However, it seems that Thompson's emphasis on sociality is either developmentally motivated and concerned with the intersubjectively-open intentionality in object perception or a question of our (rather sophisticated ability) to understand others and to make the distinction between self and other. But the subject herself, despite being intersubjectively open, is still a “bodily subject” ([Thompson 2007](#), p. 382). In other words, the structures of subjectivity itself, the very network processes that bring about the individual as an autonomous system, are determined bodily, not intersubjectively.

throughout the paper in the form of other subjects that seem to enable the individual's understanding in various ways. Some of the skills of access are interpersonal and also, as Noë emphasizes, have to be learned.

The question is, how do we learn skills? We usually learn through a teacher, and thus through the help of another being. Similarly, how do we discover a piece of art? By discussing it with a friend, who helps to bring about a new perspective on it. The person whom we misunderstand and try again to understand is another subject. Understanding is a highly intersubjective endeavour, not only developmentally—in the sense that we need others at some point in life to learn a particular skill—but also in a continuously on-going sense, for much of the very process of human understanding happens through and with others contemporaneously. Strikingly, however, though Noë admits this in acknowledging that understanding happens through communication and thus through the contribution of other subjects, the social does not seem to matter *constitutively* in his general theory of conceptual understanding. The mechanism and structures of the process of understanding are defined in terms of sensorimotor processes, not in terms of interactions with others, and the unity that grounds conceptual understanding is constitutively the sensorimotor body in object-oriented action; it is not, more dynamically put, the individual in its relation to other subjects. The worry is that in Noë's approach, the social part of the world would therefore only play the *weak role* of an outside and divided context. In contrast, on a *strong* reading of the relation between understanding and sociality, engagements and relations with others would have a more than developmental or contextual relevance. Instead, they would also be considered part and parcel of the very structure of the process of understanding, and they would (as I argue below) figure in the minimal constitution of autonomous selfhood.

Noë characterises Dreyfus's anti-intellectualist stance as "crypto-intellectualist" because Dreyfus allegedly accepts the premises of the intellectualist's view that understanding is rule-based judgement. Yet one might say that in his

attempt to overcome the dichotomy between existential phenomenology and classical conceptualism, Noë inherits a very similar problem. Noë's actionist approach opens the individual up to the world; but, perhaps because he is trying to avoid an implication of Dreyfus' existential phenomenology, namely the risk of losing the individual (as already immersed) in the world, Noë also risks over-emphasizing the status of the embodied individual, thereby missing the deeper relation between the individual and the social world. The undesirable implication is that conceptual activity is essentially an isolated undertaking (since according to standard approaches to embodiment there is nothing social about the individual body or organism *per se*). It is the lonesome individual by herself who navigates through the world, equipped with a great set of skills that enable her to act and to secure the access to the world.⁴ Because Noë seems to implicitly accept the individualistic premise of the traditional cognitivist view, one might say that that his proposal is *crypto-individualist*.

Noë is not alone in making the crypto-individualist presupposition. According to Post-Cartesian and non-cognitivist philosophy of cognition, the mind supposedly involves an active and dynamical engagement with the social and material environment, and also has an experiential dimension (Shapiro 2011; Clark & Chalmers 1998; Varela et al. 1993; Thompson 2007). But the integration of these aspects, and in particular that of the social and bodily dimension with regards to the individual that has or is the mind still remains a fundamental question. This is what I have called the *body-social problem*: how can the mind be at once a distinct bodily individual but at the same time remain open and connected to the social world? At the moment there is a dichotomy between views that posit that the mind is embodied and views that emphasize the relevance of situatedness and embeddedness. On the former view, the mind is active but confined to being an isolated indi-

4 Note that it does not actually matter whether one posits that the mind is in the head or in the body, both claims are compatible with the weak reading of the interrelation of individual and social world, according to which the social remains separated from the individual.

vidual. On the latter, the mind is primordially immersed in the (social) world. The first view risks a new form of methodological individualism where the individual mind, while no longer restricted to the brain, is now confined to the body. Here the social world becomes the external, independently given world into which these newly embodied and active, yet essentially isolated individuals parachute (Kyselo 2014).⁵ The second view focuses too much on the interaction dynamics and risks losing the immersed individual mind in the world (and social interactions), thereby blurring the very epistemological target of our philosophical inquiry (Kyselo 2013, 2014).

The body–social problem reveals a deeper linkage between Noë and the stance of the existential phenomenologist that he actually seeks to debunk. Both positions disagree with the traditional Cartesian picture of the mind; both hold that embodiment matters vitally for the mind. But notice that they also focus on different aspects of what a true alternative to the classical view might look like. The overall alternative basically involves a fundamental shift in thinking about the relation between an individual and the world. In this vein, Noë is right to emphasise the individual’s power, giving it more responsibility in the very construction of its own mind and of the world it experiences, but so are the existential phenomenologists when they focus on worldly embeddedness and the fact that a great deal of our being in the world relies on pre-given structures that can surpass the individual’s capacities. An emphasis on individual action and responsibility cannot mean that the individual is all alone. We would not have made enough progress if the main difference between Noë’s proposal and the representationalist division between individual and world was that now, while being able to move towards the world, the world does not also move toward us but remains separate with regard to other subjects. Other people are active, too, and they shape not merely the world for us but also

who we are as subjects. But, speaking to the potential worry of losing the individual in worldly engagements, the solution is of course neither to negate any need for differentiation nor the necessity of the individual to have its own share in the very mechanism of understanding the world. Where I think both positions go wrong is in extrapolating from a part of adult human phenomenology (even when it is paired, as in Noë’s case, with an objective account of the constitutive mechanism of experience) to a general theory of understanding. In crypto-individualism the individual mind carries a heavy burden. It is free from passivity and yet enormously restrained by the responsibility of achieving the access to the world (and the social world) and itself, all by itself. Existential phenomenologists, in emphasising the importance of the social world and its pre-given structures in bringing about understanding then ease the burden and free the individual from some of the responsibility in achieving this; and yet at the same time they also risk depriving the individual of its power and right to have a say in that endeavour.⁶

It should be clear that neither position on its own will suffice to overcome the dichotomy inherent in the intellectualist view on concepts. The individual cannot understand the world simply by being an individual body, but neither is the world already understood just by simply being immersed in it.

3 Deep dynamics and the enactive self

There exists a middle ground from which the dilemma of having to choose between too much or too little individualism can be avoided and a more complete epistemological basis for conceptual understanding achieved. Finding this middle ground basically consists in re-thinking the nature of the mind and of human understanding while doing more justice to the deep interrelation between individual and social world. To this end I have recently proposed the

⁵ This image is adapted from Varela et al. (1993), who criticise the traditional view as implying that the environment is a “landing pad for organisms that somehow drop or parachute into the world” (p. 198); instead, they argue that the relation between world and individual mind is co-determining.

⁶ This commentary is not the place to discuss this issue in detail, but it should be noted that such a view can be expanded to political philosophy and the philosophy of law, where it might have far reaching consequences for questions concerning the nature of individual rights and approaches to legal responsibility.

concept of the *socially enacted self* (Kyselo 2014, 2013; Kyselo & Tschacher 2014). On this approach, the individual is not sufficiently determined in terms of active embodiment; instead it is thought to incorporate social and relational processes into the structure that makes up its identity as an individual. This suggests that without a “social loop” we cannot speak about the human self as a centre of individuation in any interesting sense. After all, humans do not merely distinguish themselves against a background of material objects, but, crucially, against the world of other humans. They become someone, an identifiable individual against a world of other individuals and social groups.

This idea should become clearer by reconsidering, or making more explicit, a number of insights already implied in diverse approaches in embodied cognitive science.

First, Noë’s crypto-individualism captures something essential about the ways humans access the world: we often experience the process of understanding as something we do by ourselves—the concepts we acquire and employ are ours and to a large extent we appear to be in control in our attempts to secure the world. Noë’s other important insight is that conceptual understanding is an achievement. It is a far-from-perfect endeavour, involving experiences of vulnerability, openness, of not always being able to own and to access the world.

The second insight is appreciated in the debate on extended cognition. Clark & Chalmers in their now classical paper “The Extended Mind” propose that a tool, such as a notebook or a computer, can count as part of the individual mind (1998). This essentially functionalist position goes against Noë and “beyond the sensorimotor frontier” (Clark 2008, p. 195)—the mind is not restricted to the body but spreads across neuronal, bodily, and environmental features. The extended cognition approach to embodiment has been criticised for being too liberal, since it lacks both a principled definition of “body” and of “cognition”. It remains unclear how an environmental prop or technology could be integrated into the cognitive architecture of an individual mind (Kyselo & Di Paolo 2013, see also Menary this collec-

tion). Yet, despite these shortcomings I believe there are two important insights in this extended functionalist account: first, that the individual should not be restricted to the biological realm (be it the brain *or* the body) but incorporates tools and technologies, and second, that the mind transcends the individual physiological body and that the world matters constitutively for determining the boundaries of the mind.

The third insight comes from the enactive approach to cognition, which proposes that the mind is basically an autonomous system that self-organizes its identity based on operational closure. The enactive approach thereby shares with extended cognition the idea that the individual is not clearly separable from the environment. On the enactive view, the individual’s mind is “defined by its endogenous, self-organizing and self-controlling dynamics, does not have inputs and outputs in the usual sense, and determines the cognitive domain in which it operates” (Thompson 2007, p. 43). Identity is therefore not a given thing or a property, but *relational*: brought forth through the individual’s on-going and dynamical interaction with the world. This approach adds an insight derived from philosophy of biology, namely that like living beings, cognitive beings create an identity that they strive to maintain, and that understanding the world depends on the purposes and concerns of that identity (Weber & Varela 2002; Thompson 2007) in that they guide and structure our understanding.⁷

The three variants of embodied cognitive science therefore all reject the mind–body dichotomy and emphasise a dynamical interrelation between embodied individual and world. All of them however, either miss or do not fully acknowledge that the world is social and that the individual is also a psychological and social being whose concerns are more than object-oriented. This is where the enactive approach to the social self comes into play. It basically elaborates on and integrates the above insights, i.e., action (sensorimotor cognition), co-constitution

⁷ Interestingly, this is also an insight Dreyfus pointed out much earlier when he argued that the “human world, then is prestructured in terms of human purposes and concerns in such a way that what counts as an object or is significant about an object already is a function of, or embodies, that concern” (1972, p. 173).

(extended cognition), and grounding in selfhood (enactive cognition), by adopting a much more radical perspective on the dynamical interrelation between the individual and the world—let us call this perspective *deep dynamics*. Deep dynamics means that the nature of the relation between individual and world is one of strong co-constitution: not only does the individual actively shape and structure the world, the world, too, affects the individual in its basic organisational structure. If identity and domain depend on each other in a strong and mutual sense, as the enactive approach to cognition has it, then even more advanced non-organismic or virtual notions of the body do not change the fact that the organismic bodily domain is an individualist domain (Kyselo & Di Paolo 2013). In other words, the organismic body cannot be related to the social at the same level of organisational closure. The enactive approach to the self would suggest instead that the level at which human selves can be usefully operationalised as autonomous identities is social, not merely embodied. Admittedly, by emphasising how conceptual understanding is shaped through social engagements with others, Noë's approach obviously also implies a bi-directional relation between individual and world. Similarly, as we have seen above, Thompson's sensorimotor subject is also clearly involved in intersubjective interactions (2005, p. 408). However, the bi-directional impact in these accounts is more *shallow* than in the present proposal, as they consider the (social) world to play a contextual or developmental role, or to matter with regards to shaping object-recognition. In deep dynamics, in contrast, we expand on the insight of extended cognition that the mind transcends brain and body by acknowledging that this not only the case through interactions with tools but also through our social interactions and relations with other subjects. The idea then is that *qua* being embedded in a social world, the self, and by that I mean the individual as a whole, constitutively relies on its interactions and relations to other subjects. According to this elaboration on the enactive account of selfhood, the self can be defined as a socially enacted autonomous system. It is:

a self-other generated network of precariously organized interpersonal processes whose systemic identity emerges as a result of a continuous engagement in social interactions and relations that can be qualified as moving in two opposed directions, toward emancipation from others (distinction) and toward openness to them (participation). (Kyselo 2014)

In line with the concept of operational closure, both types of processes, distinction and participation, are required to bring about the individual self. Without distinction, the individual would risk immersion or becoming heteronomously determined and forced to rely on the next best or a limited set of social interactions. But without participation and an act of openness towards others, the individual eschews structural renewal, thus risking isolation and rigidity (Kyselo 2014). The point, however, is that this form of operational closure contains social interactions. In enactive terms, this is to say that the individual is at the same time self-and-other-organized. As a consequence, the self is not a given nor an individual bodily achievement but also and necessarily co-constructed with others. Both the individual and the world (that is, other subjects) have a say in the constitutive mechanism of someone's mind. In contrast to Noë's presupposition, the mind cannot be equated with the active body. Rather, the sensorimotor body becomes the ever-evolving interface that in being with others co-generates the very boundaries of what we call the self (Kyselo 2014).

At this point, proponents of embodiment might still want to insist that there is something about the body's role in grounding the sense of self that non-negotiably remains entirely independent from social interactions. I agree, if by "sense of self" one refers to the self as mere biological identity. However, if by "self" we mean the human self in distinction from other humans, then the proposed view challenges this intuition. It does this, however, without giving up the insight that the self has to do with individuation. The enactive notion of autonomy and self-organization saves the indi-

vidual from immersion in the social world by appreciating that the distinction between individual and world is an organisational, not ontological distinction. Our sense of being a distinct someone is something that is achieved together with others, not just qua being a biological body.

The basic idea of the socially enacted self is therefore not to overcome the tension entailed in the body-social dichotomy but rather to welcome and recognise it as a necessary property of mind itself and to thus integrate this tension into a general theory of understanding. On this view, the individual mind has to continuously negotiate its identity as an individual agent and its understanding in dependence on other subjects. As a consequence, uncertainty, conflict, and a permanent need for negotiation and co-negotiation are part and parcel of being an essentially social human mind. This is why it might be useful to distinguish several senses of fragility. Fragile understanding is one of them. But on the enactive account of selfhood, mind itself is fragile.

4 Varieties of co-presence

Let us now explore a couple of implications that a deep dynamics view has for conceptual understanding. By basing conceptual understanding on an understanding of the individual as a socially enacted autonomous system, we can do justice to existential phenomenologists who emphasize the importance of situatedness and flow and also to Noë's rightful actionist call for emancipation of the passive individual mind. For Noë, the unity of conceptual modes is derived from positing an active, thinking, sensorimotor body. The present proposal suggests that the unity is grounded in a socially co-organized individual. Noë's idea of thinking of experiencing and understanding the world as a "relation between a skillful person and really existing thing" (2012, p. 42), could thus be elaborated by saying that the intentional relation is also a relation to other subjects, so that intentionality is actually co-generated. Yet this co-generated intentionality is not merely about sharing a perspective on the world; it is a co-generated rela-

tion that feeds into the very organisational structure of mind itself. The person involved in the intentional relation is a social subject. In accordance with the two-fold structure of socially enacted autonomy, this would also mean that self-reflexivity has a social structure, entailing a sense of being a self as separate individual and a sense of being open and connected to the world.

Here lies the deeper reason for why the process of understanding is fragile. The fragility of understanding consists precisely in the fact that the unity of mind is never a given, but is itself an on-going achievement. Since, as I suggest, this is an achievement with others, presence does not merely depend on what we do, but also on what others do, and especially on what we do with them. In other words, presence is actually *co-presence*. It is clearly outside the scope of this commentary to explicate this in more detail, but generally speaking it means that understanding simply never really is the endeavour of an individual mind. This complements Noë's perspective and invites future explorations in at least two fundamental senses.

First, with regards to the role of others in empowering the individual by enabling access to the world: our conceptual skills are acquired and the acquisition of these skills usually happens in interaction and by learning together with others. But our ways of understanding are also *continuously* shaped and mediated by being with others, be it through cultural norms, biases, advice, or advertisement. Apart from the obvious fact that much of instantaneous understanding happens together with others, even in the absence of others, in the process of understanding, we often presuppose another subject or at least some implicit act of relationality. Noë says that "there is no such thing as a perceptual encounter with the object that is not also an encounter with it from one or another point of view" (2012, p. 138). I could not agree more, and yet I suggest we also embrace the idea that these other viewpoints are not merely defined in terms of changes in head or body-movement but also in terms of loops to and from different subjective and intersubjective view points.

If conceptual understanding has the purpose of bringing us into contact with the world, as Noë claims, then we should not underestimate the role of others and of our being open to them in making this contact possible. To consider human understanding as fragile is also to admit a limitation of the individual's capacities and to allow others and our dialogues with them to play a fundamental role. In this sense fragility can be a source of power. Our minds are open, not only to the world, but also to contributions from others.

But that said, and this is the second and final implication of the enactive self for the basic nature of human understanding, the social nature and fragility of mind also restricts the individual's capacities. When the social plays a marginal and contextual role, the individual's responsibility in understanding the world is immense and the optimism in the individual's capacities can become a heavy burden. The other side of fragility is that the presence of the world is not only "not for free", as Noë puts it, but it is actually sometimes not available at all. It is not available because other subjects have a say in the construction of our understanding, and given that they have perspectives and interests of their own, their contribution may sometimes be out of reach, run contrary to what we need, or even confuse us deeply. The fragile nature of our social mind can therefore also deny us access to the world.

5 Conclusion

In his book *Varieties of Presence*, Noë refers to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), the story of Gregor Samsa, who wakes up as an insect, lying on his back, unable to move. Noë uses the story to illustrate the upshot of his philosophy of understanding. "We are not only animals", he says, but we "achieve the world by enacting ourselves. Insofar as we achieve access to the world, we also achieve *ourselves*" (Noë 2012, p. 28).

On the presented alternative, the actionist nature of self-achieved understanding is only half of the story. I have suggested that our minds and selves are genuinely social and thus transcend the limits of our bodily existence. The human self vitally depends on others and is

achieved together with them, through negotiating a permanent tension of maintaining a sense of individuality while not losing the connection to others (distinction and participation).

From this perspective, the point of Kafka's story is therefore not so much to deny that we are animals, but rather to claim that we are *social* animals that achieve ourselves *together* with others. Reflecting the basic insight of this paper, the story thus illustrates the fragility and social nature of human existence. It is an expression of desperation and of the suffering that can come when others refuse or are unable to comply with our basic needs: being recognised as individual and as someone who belongs to others. Having lost contact with himself as a human subject in the bureaucratic machinery of his professional life, Samsa awakes as an insect, his new embodiment an imprint of alienation and loss of recognition. But the loss cuts even deeper. With his alien embodiment Samsa the insect is rejected by his family, so that he finds no salvation in his private life. Samsa dies from social isolation. From an enactive view of the self as a joint achievement, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* captures (like much of his other work) the consequences of our deep vulnerability and limited freedom and the drama of the loss from which we can suffer precisely because we are social beings.

The social structures that we depend upon empower our ways of understanding; yet for the same reason they can also enslave us, and seriously limit our mental capacities. This, I suggest, is not merely the case for institutions and their bureaucratic apparatus but also applies to our direct intersubjective relations, be they with lovers, friends, family, or co-workers.

Presence is therefore not simply availability—since this would suggest the subject's unwarranted access to the world. Presence is rather a joint achievement, and the nature of doing things together is that there will always be leaps and limitations. In this way, failure and limited control over the ways we understand the world are not entirely the responsibility of the individual and its techniques and skills, but also a deeper expression of the genuinely social and co-constructed nature of understanding.

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Beyond Agency

A Reply to Miriam Kyselo

Alva Noë

In this paper I respond to [Kyselo's \(this collection\)](#) claim that actionism, and other versions of the enactive embodied approach to mind, fail to accord social relations a constitutive role in making up the human mind. I argue that actionism can meet this challenge—the view makes relations to others central to an account of human experience—but I also question whether the challenge is clear enough. I ask: what exactly does it mean to say that social relations play this sort of constitutive role?

Keywords

Actionism | Body-social problem | Concept pluralism | Concepts | Consciousness | Enactive account | Enactive self | Evans | Fragility | Frege | Individualism | Intellectualism | Kant | Organized activity | Perception | Plato | Presence | Sensorimotor account | Socially enacted autonomy | Socially extended mind | The intellectualist insight | The intellectualist thesis | Understanding | Wittgenstein

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1 Introduction

In my contribution to this volume ([Noë this collection](#)), I seek to bring out the truth in intellectualism. The intellectualist is right, I concede, that understanding is at work throughout the domain of agency—wherever we can talk of perception, or thinking, or action. Understanding is pervasive. The trouble with intellectualism, I argue, is that it cleaves to an unrealistic conception of what is demanded for understanding to come into play. In particular, it adheres to an over-intellectualized conception of understanding, according to which an action, or a perception, can be conceptual only if it is guided, as it were from above, by explicit acts

of judgment. In my target paper I also criticize *anti-intellectualist* views, such as that of Dreyfus, for failing to break with intellectualism; such views reject the pervasiveness of the understanding because they accept the intellectualist's hyper-intellectualized conception of what understanding is and because they find it implausible that our experiential or cognitive lives are intellectual in this way. In this brief reply to Kyselo's excellent commentary, I would like to say something about what the anti-intellectualism of the sort I criticize in the paper *gets right*. I now want to try to bring out the insight in anti-intellectualism.

2 The truth in anti-intellectualism

If the intellectualist is right that understanding saturates the space of agency, the anti-intellectualist is right that there is also understanding *beyond* the limits of our agency. Stanley (2011, cited in Noë [this collection](#)) relied on the opposition between the personal and the subpersonal; he supposed that what makes a mere reflex, which is subpersonal, an action, which is personal, is that it is guided by knowledge or reason. But the opposition between reflex and action is not exhaustive, and the crucial dimension is not that of the contrast between the personal and the subpersonal. Consider conversation, as an example. We can characterize conversation as a personal-level action. But there is a way of describing the phenomenon that defies such characterization. When two people talk they adopt similar postures, they pause at coordinated intervals, they adjust their volumes to match each other, they move their eyes and modify their dialects, all in ways that are governed by their interaction (see Shockley et al. 2009 for a review of this literature). Talking is what I elsewhere call an “organized activity” (Noë [in press](#)). One remarkable feature of organized activities, in this sense, is that they are not guided by the participants or authored by them. Another is that they are carried on spontaneously and without deliberate control. And yet another is that they are clearly domains in which highly sophisticated cognitive capacities—looking, listening, paying attention, moving, undergoing—are put to work.

Notice: I said above that talking, in the sense I have in mind, is not a personal-level activity. What I mean by this is that the sort of tight coupling and temporal dynamics, the sort of organization we see at work when people talk, is not best characterized at the level of minutes, hours, choices, etc. that normally characterize the personal level. But nor is this a phenomenon of the subpersonal level. For one thing, we aren’t interested in something happening in the nervous system of *one* individual. We are interested in something encompassing two (or more) people. For another, we aren’t interested in processes unfolding at time-scales of

milliseconds. No. We *are* interested in what people do, but in a manner that is truly *beyond* agency. We are interested, here, in a phenomenon of the *embodiment level* (as distinct from the subpersonal or the personal level).

And yet we remain, when thinking about conversation—or any other organized activity—very much in a domain where we can and must speak of cognitive achievement, understanding, skill, and so on.

One upshot of these considerations, then, is that while understanding, as I argued above, is a necessary condition of agency, it is also present beyond its limits. Another is that understanding beyond the limits of agency cannot be understood individualistically. This is obvious in the case of intrinsically social activities, like conversation, but it is also true for organized activities that can be carried out by solitary individuals (such as *seeing*, for example).

The thing that anti-intellectualism gets right, as I see it, is the appreciation that a great deal of what we *do*, isn’t really done *by us*: activity happens to us; we find ourselves organized. We are made what we are in the setting of organized activities.

From the standpoint of the theory of organized activities—presented in more detail in Noë ([in press](#))—we are creatures who are from the very beginning caught up in world and other-involving organized activities; these activities form the lived substrate of our biographical lives as persons. Actionism, in these ways, is committed to a radical form of anti-individualism.

3 The challenge of crypto-individualism

Now, Kyselo has criticized actionism not for ignoring the social, but for failing to treat the social as constitutive of human cognitive organization. Kyselo’s point is that for actionism, other people and our relations to them “shape” the mind, but they do so in the same the way that any environmental conditions cause, constrain, or enable human experience; the view makes no allowance for the stronger possibility that other people and our social relations with them are actually *constitutive* of what it is to be a human

being. So she writes, with actionism as one of her targets in mind:

Philosophers of cognition systematically assume that the mind is essentially embodied, while the social world remains the context in which the embodied mind is embedded. On this view, the social arguably shapes the mind, but it does not figure in the constitution of the mind itself. (Kyselo [this collection](#), p. 2)

And she goes on to explain:

I argue that since the world of humans is a social world of others and our social relations is what matters most to us, the social must also figure in the constitutive structure of human cognitive individuation. The human mind or self is not only embodied but also genuinely social. (*ibid.*, p. 2)

In a footnote, she then elaborates:

By saying that sociality matters constitutively for the human self, I mean that without continuously relating and engaging in interaction with others, there would be no human self as a whole. The social is not only causally relevant for enacting self-hood, but it is also an essential component of its minimal organizational structure. (*ibid.*, p. 2)

Now, I admit that the language of earlier work (Noë 2004, 2012) can be taken to suggest something like crypto-individualism. In so far as I talk about presence as something that thinkers and perceivers “achieve,” and in so far as I insist that, in achieving the world’s presence in thought and experience, we also achieve ourselves, it can perhaps sound like I am describing the enactive feats of a heroic solitary agency.

I admit that’s how it sounds. But I was careful to warn against being misled in this way. So, for example, in a passage immediately following one that Kyselo cites, I write:

But we are not only animals. I am also a father, and a teacher, and a philosopher, and a writer. These modalities of my being were no more given to me than my ability to read and write. I achieve myself. Not on my own, to be sure! And not in a heroic way. Maybe it would better to say that my parents and my friends and family and children and colleagues have achieved me for me. The point is that we are cultivated ourselves—learning to talk and read and dance and dress and play guitar and do mathematics and physics and philosophy—and in this cultivation worlds open up that would otherwise be closed off. In this way we achieve for ourselves new ways of being present.

Here I explicitly repudiate heroic individualism; we achieve ourselves with and through others; we are cultivated by a world full of others and that’s the setting in which we bring the world into focus for consciousness.

Perhaps another feature that feeds the appearance of crypto-individualism is the availability of an idealist or anti-realist reading of enacting or achieving presence. It is not in fact my view—Kyselo herself is clear about this—that we make the world, or construct it. The world shows up for us, in perception, and in thought, and for action. But it doesn’t show up for free. Just as you can’t encounter what a text means if you don’t know how to read, so you can’t see what is there to be seen without the battery of understandings necessary for reaching out and picking it up.

We don’t make the world, just as we don’t make other people. In fact, the world, and others, are necessary for us to achieve contact with it *in three distinct ways*. First, our experience of others and the world depends on their existence. If they weren’t there, we couldn’t achieve access to them. Second, our possession and exercise of the relevant skills may require the presence and participation of others. Think of the turn-taking dance that is conversation; you can’t do that without the other. Third, our possession of perceptual and cognitive skills of access de-

depends on our development in the setting of personal relationships.

Does the commitment of actionism to these three kinds of dependence of our experience on our engagement with others meet the standard of offering an account of other people as not merely shaping but as constituting our mental lives? If not, I hope to be told why.

Let me offer a final example to try to clarify what is at stake. Take a baseball team. There will be nine players on the field at a given time during a game: a pitcher and catcher, three basemen, a shortstop, and the three outfielders. Notice that there are two different ways in which we can individuate these players. We can pick them out by the role that they play—by their position, in baseball parlance—or we can pick them out by *the player*, that is, by the particular person who is playing the role. Take the shortstop, for example. The shortstop is the near outfielder, or the far infielder; he is positioned between 2nd and 3rd bases. His job is to field balls hit to him and to deliver the balls to teammates in ways that work to his team's advantage. For our purposes it is important to notice that a shortstop is a social creature in the sense that a) to be a shortstop is to play a role that can only be specified by naming other positions and shared goals and needs, and b) that there is no such thing as a shortstop outside of the context of convention, practice, and history—for that is what baseball is: a structure in a temporally extended space of convention and practice. A shortstop, we might say, is a thoroughly social kind of thing. It is constituted by social relations.

Notice that this way of thinking about what it is to be a shortstop takes nothing away from the fact that shortstops are embodied and that they are in continuous dynamic exchange with their physical environment. The quality of a shortstop is usually framed in terms of the range of ground he can cover, the softness of his hands, the strength of his arm, the delicacy and control of his footwork, and finally, his understanding of what to do in the split-second heat of play. Physical and intellectual skill are all properties of this essentially social being, the

shortstop. And this is so for all the other players.

Now, the fact that being a shortstop is something “whose identity is brought forth through body-mediated social interaction”, as we could say, borrowing Kyselo's words ([this collection](#), p. 2), doesn't entail that the flesh-and-blood human being who is playing shortstop is also in the same way identity-dependent on his or her social relations. The individual existence of the man, after all, the actual guy, the living human organism, is presupposed by his entering into the kinds of relationships that can make it the case that he is also a shortstop.

This sort of consideration can be generalized: just as we can distinguish the player from the position he plays, so we can distinguish the *human being* from the *person* he or she also is. Personhood is enacted, achieved, or performed in ways not so different from the way being a baseball-player is undertaken. A person is defined by nesting and overlapping roles—daughter, employer, citizen, rebel, lover, failure, and so on. And these roles are genuinely constitutive of who or what a person is, of his or her identity. Truly these constitutive features that make a person the person she is are robustly and thoroughly social, in all the ways being a shortstop is social. You can't be a person on your own, any more than you can be a shortstop on your own. Persons are creatures of normative, evaluative spaces. Persons are performers. They perform their personhood. And they bear the ever-present burden of being evaluated. That, finally, is the difference between mere action and performance. Performance, as distinct from mere action, happens against the background of the possibility of being judged (good dancer, good father, good lover, good student, etc.).

Personhood is enacted. But what about being human? Is that enacted as well? Is one's status as a human being, like one's status as a person, or a shortstop, something that is accomplished through one's body-mediated social interactions?

This much is clear. Being a distinct human being is antecedent to entering into the kinds of

relationships that constitute one's being a person, or a shortstop. So it can't be that it is the same kinds of relations with others that constitute one's personal identity (in my sense) that constitute one's organismic identity as a human being. My question for Kyselo, then, would be: why should we say that human beings, above and beyond the persons they enact, are, in the relevant sense, constitutively social? Or better still, the question is: what is the relevant sense of "constitutively social"?

Let me be clear that I think it would be a mistake to hold that personhood, bound up with practice, convention, and history, though it is, is *merely* cultural, and that this cultural structure is stamped or imposed onto a pre-given biological substrate (the human being). No, each of us is both a human being and a person and any comprehension of our nature needs to do justice to both of these. A biological theory of *us* will be a theory of creatures who are both persons as well as organisms and will take seriously the way these loop back and down and the way they interact.

4 Conclusion

There is much in Kyselo's excellent response to which I have said nothing in reply. I am struck, in particular, by her powerful handling of the concept of fragility. I have tried, in this reply, to show that actionism, despite appearances of heroic individualism to the contrary, recognizes that people spend their lives in worlds that are always ineliminably social.

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