
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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