
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., skilful 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, skilful 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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