

Back to Basics

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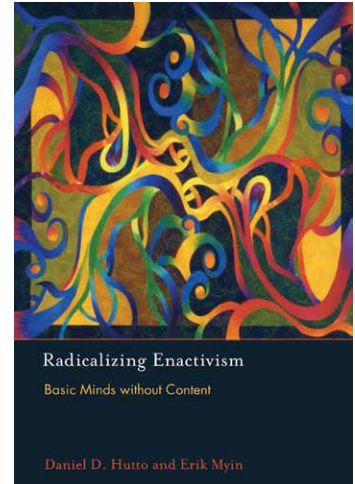
> Upshot • Hutto & Myin's latest "radical enactive cognition" manifesto is a truly exciting book and – despite its short length – quite thick with argumentation. The word "manifesto" here does not only describe the rousing writing style (filled with witty and resounding expressions), but also the general awed feeling one gets, while reading, of the importance of "RECTifying" the current state of research in enactive cognition. Interestingly for the constructivist community, the hallmark thesis of their book is that there can be intentionally directed cognition and perceptual experience without content.

Why do we need a radical revolutionary turn in enactive cognition? The general interests of enactivists in dynamic couplings between the organism and its environment is already considered a radical standpoint by the supporters of representational (embodied or disembodied) approaches to the science of mind. In *Radicalizing Enactivism*, these approaches are dubbed CIC (the "cognition necessarily involves content" claim) and CEC ("conservative embodied/enactive cognition," which retains CIC's commitment to the idea that basic cognition is contentful). By basic cognition (BC), Daniel Hutto & Erik Myin understand "mental activity that exhibits intentional directedness and phenomenality" (iv). Their claim – radically opposed to CIC and CEC – is that BC is "not underwritten by processes involving the manipulation of content, nor is it inherently contentful" (iv). Thus, following Hutto & Myin's line of thinking, the reason for a revolution lies in the need for enactivism to gather sufficient resources to justifiably "silence" its theoretical opponents: that is, to completely reject CIC.

This book outlines this revolution from scratch. The only way to pursue its goals is to provide a stable and tenable framework for thinking about BC. The hallmark counterthesis of the book is thus that there can be intentionally directed cognition and perceptual experience without content. According to the authors' radical enactive cognition (REC) thesis, all forms of mental representations (apart from sophisticated linguistic ones) are claimed to be free of content. The

main problem of CIC lies in the fact that while aiming to explain BC, it is unable to account for the origins of content in the world, given the fact that it is forced to use nothing more than standard naturalist resources. This problem is dubbed the "hard problem of content."

The book starts with a rather short but critical review of the works in CIC and CEC, situating REC in current debates. The book remains neutral towards Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch's (1991) idea that organisms "enact" or "bring forth" their worlds, which – in the case of humans – leads them to conclude that the world as perceived is *constituted* through the complex patterns of our sensorimotor activities. At the same time, Hutto & Myin's aim is to promote REC by calling upon their versions of the above ideas. Accordingly, they firstly advance the so-called "embodiment thesis," which equates basic cognition with concrete spatio-temporally extended patterns of dynamic interactions between organisms and their environments. According to the embodiment thesis, phenomenal properties of experience are nothing more than specifiable sorts of activity (even if only neural activity). BC is also literally constituted of concrete patterns of environmentally situated organismic activity that unfolds across time. Importantly, these interactions are not linear but looping, making it impossible to isolate the "inner" mentality constituting organismic responses from the "outer" (environmental) causal contributions. Instead, multiple areas in the body and the brain are involved in mutual and simultaneous recip-



Review of *Radicalizing Enactivism: Basic Minds without Content*
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rocal causation. Secondly, they develop the so-called "developmental explanatory thesis" – the idea that mentality-constituting interactions are grounded in, shaped by, and explained by nothing more than the history of an organism's previous interactions. On the basis of that, the hallmark of REC lies in the claim that the rejection of CIC (and representationalism in general) provides us with the clearest way of thinking about cognition as being embodied and embedded. Importantly though, REC does not deny the existence and the importance of contentful and representation based modes of thinking – they emerge and depend on the immersion in special sorts of shared practices. The primary aim of the book is then expressed in the following statement:

“Enactivists are concerned to defend the view that our most elementary ways of engaging with the world and others (including basic forms of

perception and perceptual experience) are mindful in the sense of being phenomenally charged and intentionally directed, despite being non-representational and content-free.” (13)

Chapter 2 is focused on criticizing versions of enactivism (sensorimotor enactivism and autopoietic enactivism) *less radical* than REC. The former enactivism, in which perception is the process of interaction between the organism and environment on the basis of sensorimotor contingencies (e.g., Nöe 2004), is seen as embracing ideas rejected by REC: namely that perceptual experience is inherently contentful. Secondly, the authors reject autopoietic enactivism, which is based on the idea that mentality is something that emerges from the self-organizational activities of living organisms (e.g., Thompson 2007). Similar to the critique of the former type of enactivism, the argument made against the autopoietic approach is directed against the claim that sensory stimuli are seen as carrying meaning. Moreover, this type of enactivism is seen as operating on misleading notions of “interpretation,” “sense-making,” or “understanding” in describing the responses of simple living systems.

Chapters 3 to 6 make an argument for REC, trying to shake the old order of thinking about the nature of basic minds. Chapter 3 examines familiar ways of thinking that one can explain BC without calling upon the notion of content. Following classic authors such as Gilbert Ryle (1949), Hutto & Myin claim that the key problem with the so-called intellectualist picture of basic cognition is that it takes rational deliberation to be the most basic kind of cognitive operation. Here the authors suggest that the way to solve the hard problem of content lies in the understanding of cognitive activities as involving a complex series of systematic (but not contentfully-mediated) interactions between well-tuned mechanisms. In Chapter 4, the authors go on to argue that we cannot accept CIC accounts without surrendering to explanatory naturalism. Following that line of thinking, in Chapter 5, Hutto & Myin introduce and set out to attack the possible strategy that the intellectualism proponents may adopt, i.e., so-called “maximally minimal intellectualism.” This standpoint is based on (1) the idea that perception

has truth-conditional content (but denying that the senses supply this content) and (2) that the principles of perceptions are represented by and within perceptual systems, and (3) that perceptual content is essentially conceptual. A detailed analysis of maximally minimal intellectualism is provided in Chapter 6, in which the authors discuss Christopher Gauker’s (2011) proposition of non-conceptual perception, Tyler Burge’s (2010) commitment to contentful perceptual representation, and John McDowell’s (2009) argument for representational perceptual experience.

The last two chapters of the book focus on the implementation of REC in current philosophical debates. Chapter 7 tackles the issue of the extended mind hypothesis (EMH). Hutto & Myin analyze arguments against EMH, including the internalist critique of parity-motivated EMH – the argument here is that Andy Clark & David Chalmers’ (1998) EMH cannot establish anything more than that external features sometimes play supporting causal roles in enabling cognitive tasks. In this chapter they also discuss the second wave of EMH – complementarity-motivated EMH (cEMH) – describing its weakness in its commitment to CIC. In short, the proponents of cEMH suggest that external features play an extending role only if manipulating these features enables forms and acts of cognition that would not be otherwise possible (using only internal resources). The authors of *Radicalizing Enactivism* allude to their courageous claim at the beginning of the book: the only way to justifiably “silence” EMH internalist opponents is to embrace REC.

Finally, Chapter 8 tackles the application of REC to the debates on phenomenal consciousness, i.e., the existence of qualia – the hard problem of consciousness. According to Hutto & Myin, this problem is not only hard but – indeed – impossible to solve. Given that, we should focus on the epistemic gap between the functioning of our brains and the phenomenal experience.

To conclude, *Radicalizing Enactivism* is a genuinely intellectual endeavor. The importance of this book for the constructivist community lies in the fact that while providing a thought-provoking and thick argumentation (to which it is hard to do justice in a book review), it tackles a variety of in-

teresting issues. It also offers an interesting strategy for working on enactivism. Unfortunately, the book’s argument develops quite quickly in some places and thus may be hard to follow by those who are not familiar with both contemporary and classical literature. Yet the latter is not necessary a flaw – this book is a (witty and engagingly written) manifesto with a true revolutionary feel to it. I am certainly interested in observing both the reach and the intellectual shakedown it will hopefully have and bring.

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