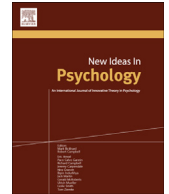




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Beyond neurophenomenology: A review of Colombetti's *The Feeling Body*

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ABSTRACT

I review *The Feeling Body: Affective Science Meets the Enactive Mind* by Giovanna Colombetti (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014, 288 pages, \$40.00 hardcover). In this book Colombetti draws on the enactive theory of organismic embodiment and its key concept of sense-making in order to critically evaluate various aspects of mainstream affective science, including basic emotions and alternative constructionist approaches, as well as the cognitivist approach to emotion and appraisal theory. She defends and develops a dynamical systems approach to emotions and emphasizes the need for including more first-person methods of consciousness science in mainstream affective neuroscience. These are valuable contributions to affective science, and they also advance enactive theory. Colombetti's proposal goes further than standard neurophenomenology in that she appeals to the bodily basis of feeling, thereby requiring a new sort of neuro-physiophenomenology. Even more radically, she allows that all living beings are essentially affective beings, even those without a nervous system, and that emotional forms could be co-constituted by more than one person.

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1. Introduction

Colombetti's (2014) book *The Feeling Body: Affective Science Meets the Enactive Mind* is a welcome addition to the tradition of enactivism that was inaugurated by Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) and continued by Thompson (2007) and many others (e.g. Di Paolo, Rohde, & De Jaegher, 2010). Nowadays there is a veritable diversity of "enactive" approaches that share some commonalities but also disagree with each other on a number of key issues (e.g. Cappuccio & Froese, 2014; Ellis & Newton, 2010; Hutto & Myin, 2013; Noë, 2004; Stewart, Gapenne, & Di Paolo, 2010). For instance, there are disputes about the extent to which we should admit talk of inner mental

representations, and about whether perceptual experience is better conceived of as an internal construction or a direct relation with an environment. Thus, it is important to highlight that when Colombetti talks about the "enactive mind" in the title of her book she is specifically referring to the enactive theory of mind first proposed by Varela et al. (1991), and that is continuing to be developed by a new generation of researchers after his death (McGann, De Jaegher, & Di Paolo, 2013). The novelty of her proposal lies in its thematic focus. Leaving aside current philosophical debates about mental representation and perceptual experience, Colombetti is interested in exploring the enactive notion of living and lived embodiment.

Following on from Thompson's (2007) synthesis of that enactive approach, this book can be seen as the third monograph in that tradition. Colombetti makes at least three important contributions. First, she systematically

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unpacks several theoretical implications of organismically embodied sense-making, which is a concept that was introduced into enactivism by Weber and Varela (2002) and has since become a cornerstone of further developments (Di Paolo, et al., 2010). Second, Colombetti develops these implications into a more appropriate theoretical framework for affective science, thereby further expanding the interdisciplinarity of enactivism and in turn confronting its theories with additional empirical data. Third, on the basis of this encounter between affective science and the enactive mind, Colombetti critically reviews the methods and results of the neurophenomenology research program, which was introduced into the enactive approach by Varela (1996) and has continued to be developed since then in a variety of guises (e.g. Bockelman, Reinerman-Jones, & Gallagher, 2013; Pettimengin & Lachaux, 2013; Thompson, 2006, 2007).

Colombetti's critique of mainstream affective science seems to me to be right on target, as are her detailed suggestions for improvement, i.e. that the field needs to tone down its intellectualism and instead pay more systematic attention to the dynamics and phenomenology of living and lived embodiment. Specifically, she makes a critique of basic emotions and of alternative constructionist approaches; presents a defense of a dynamical systems approach; critically evaluates the mainstream cognitive approach to emotion and of the related appraisal theory; and disapproves of mainstream affective neuroscience's tendency of neglecting first-person methods. These are certainly useful contributions to the field of affective science, but since that is not my area of expertise I will not say more about it here (although I will return to issues surrounding the use of first-person methods and their integration with the dynamical systems approach in the form of neurophenomenology). Instead I will primarily highlight the several ways in which Colombetti challenges the general brain-centrism of mainstream cognitive science. The alternatives she proposes are pushing the boundaries of enactivism itself, and point to exciting prospects of future developments. I also point to some recent work that resonates with her general proposal.

2. The affective body: an enactive theory of embodiment

One of the virtues of Colombetti's book is that it offers an extended exposition of the enactive account of embodiment. Since the emergence of embodied cognitive science in the '90s, a variety of different approaches to embodiment have been on offer. Typically, the concept of embodiment is loosely taken as a system's physical instantiation, and no essential distinction is made between the "body" of a robot and an organism. The enactive approach stands out for being one of the few embodied approaches that insists that organismic embodiment differs in essential ways from that of robots and other artificial systems (Froese & Ziemke, 2009). In particular, living beings' self-production under far-from-equilibrium conditions is taken as providing the key to understanding some of essential characteristics of life and mind (for one closely related approach to cognitive science, see interactionism

(Bickhard, 2009)). The enactive approach also stands out for arguing that the precarious mode of organic existence is not a contingent side-effect of life on earth, which could in principle be removed by downloading minds into an artificial paradise of pure logic (as some computationalists fondly believe). On the contrary, precariousness is at the root of sense-making as such, where sense-making is taken as a rough-and-ready definition of mind: a process of meaningfully relating to an environment.

Starting from this bio-phenomenological foundation of enactivism, Colombetti highlights an implication that is crucial for affective science: "The mind, as embodied, is intrinsically or constitutively affective; [...]. Affectivity [...] refers broadly to a *lack of indifference*, and rather a *sensibility or interest* for one's existence" (p. 1). This thesis about the mind is not limited to the case of humans. It is intended as a general thesis about life as such: "all living systems – even the simplest ones – are affective; hence the term *primordial affectivity*" (p. 2). In other words, primordial affectivity is the originary capacity to be sensitive to one's existence in the world, and as such it is a necessary condition for specific emotions and moods to appear. Primordial affectivity is not to be equated with what we consciously experience from the first-person perspective as affective, although again it is a necessary precursor for having such an experience.

Colombetti derives two radical hypotheses from the basic concept of primordial affectivity relating to states of mind that supervene on less and more than an individual person's nervous system. In fact, the hypotheses are so radical that they would have been unthinkable in the cognitive sciences not too long ago, and they continue to be challenging even for enactivism. After discussing these two hypotheses in the next two sections, I finish with some general methodological comments and offer some conclusions.

3. Affective sense-making without neurons

First, Colombetti directly confronts mainstream neurocentric thinking by boldly claiming that sense-making in general and specifically primordial affectivity "is not meant to depend on the nervous system alone. Rather, it is enacted by the whole organism, and indeed even by organisms that lack a nervous system" (p. 21). This will be a welcome move for life-mind continuity theorists who have a predilection for thinking about the possibilities of bacterial and plant cognition, because Colombetti's notion of primordial affectivity helps to elucidate what such a minimal mind is like. Yet this same claim will seem utterly bizarre to most other cognitive scientists – including perhaps to advocates of other strands of enactivism, who complain that this "autopoietic enactivism" tends to over-anthropomorphize basic living systems (Hutto & Myin, 2013).

Personally, I am sympathetic to the idea that living beings without a nervous system are also situated in an environment that is meaningful for them, for example with regard to making sense of what to approach and what to avoid. But Colombetti does not say much about how exactly we should imagine "what it is like" to be such a creature, apart from affirming that we are dealing neither with

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