

Hume – cyber-Hume – enactive Hume

Interview with Tom Froese

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Before your interview for Avant, you have written: "I recently did a lot of work in cognitive science research which explicitly crosses over between phenomenology and dynamics, and in some sense this can be seen as a continuation of Hume's specific project to establish a foundational science of man". Would you agree that one of the determinants of an unprejudiced approach to traditional philosophy is... an enthusiasm?

I think that cultivating an awareness of our past is an essential aspect of managing our future, and this is especially the case if we are interested in shaping the future of the sciences of the mind. In this regard we should not forget that Hume himself, of course, was also an enthusiastic scholar and famous historian. However, I would not say that this enthusiasm gives rise to an 'unprejudiced approach' as such; we should not forget the critical lessons of postmodernism. At the same time it is certainly true that each of the great traditional philosophers had somewhat different prejudices than we have now, and therefore reading their works presents us with an opportunity to reevaluate our own positions from a rather fresh perspective. And in many cases we will find that their traditional perspective is still implicitly determining aspects of our modern discourse, although this role will have been more or less covered by subsequent historical sedimentation.

Going back to these original sources and making their ongoing relevance explicit is an important task of modern philosophy. It can show us how the fundamental problems we are trying to solve today, whether by means of scientific experimentation, philosophical analysis, or phenomenological reflection, are not absolutely independent from our background. On the contrary, the problems gain their significance and status as problems from the context of understanding and practice in which they are embedded, and we should not be drawn into resolving a problem unless we agree

with the premises that define it as such.

In order to illustrate this point consider, for example, a typical response by computationalists to my critique of traditional artificial intelligence (see Froese and Ziemke 2009). They disagree with my critical analysis because, for instance, the famous ‘symbol grounding’ problem can now, so I am told, be solved. But this response misunderstands the deeper message of the paper: I suggest that the whole framework in which the ‘symbol grounding’ problem is originally formulated, and perhaps resolved, namely a representational theory of mind, is simply inadequate and misguided. In other words, such paradigmatic problems do not get solved during a paradigm shift; they cease to be problems altogether. And, of course, this kind of profound change in thought and practice, which always involves an uneasy and yet enticing movement toward as of yet uncharted territory, cannot be accomplished without a fair share of personal enthusiasm.



In your paper on Hume you show the potential of Hume’s ‘science of man’, which could be re-evaluated in terms of today’s cognitive science. What does Hume’s philosophy of mind mean to your own philosophical investigations?

Hume’s philosophy of mind is a very rich source of inspiration. Actually, I had one of my first big moments of philosophical awakening while contemplating the depths of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics, which was of course also inspired by Hume to a significant extent. And it was primarily in relation to Hume’s empiricist and phenomenological philosophy that I began to systematically study and to understand the constellation of modern philosophy during my doctoral studies. When I recently reread Gilles Deleuze’s (1953) excellent book on Hume in preparation for this interview, I realized once more how much we can still learn from Hume’s philosophy and how radical it really was. Let me highlight two examples here (see also Froese 2009), which could have immense consequences in cognitive science and beyond.

One of the most important things we can learn from Hume, and which motivates his entire theory of mind, is that rationalism, when pushed to its logical conclusion, cannot account for human action. Hume had the profound insight that reason alone can only inform us, and that it cannot determine how we actually respond to this informa-

tion. Choosing one course of action over another is not a question of logic, but of value, and hence of ethics:

Where a passion is neither founded on false suppositions, nor chooses means insufficient for the end, the understanding can neither justify nor condemn it. 'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. (Hume, *Treatise* 2.3.3.6)

We can find a more elaborate version of this critique of reason in Derrida's deconstruction of the decision. He argues that the outcome of a choice cannot be rationally determined in an *a priori* manner, because otherwise it was never a choice in the first place and there would be no sense of assigning responsibility for the outcome. Modern cognitive science has tried to avoid facing up to the full implications of Hume's fact-value (and reason-action) gap, which still haunts ethics today, by turning values into facts and reason into mechanism. This is, of course, the essence of the computational theory of mind. And yet Hume prevails again: the same fundamental issues make an appearance in the failure of traditional artificial intelligence to design a robot capable of effective action (the famous 'frame problem').

This brings me to the second point I want to highlight here, namely what we can learn from the way in which Hume tries to deal with this problem. He tried to devise a new foundation for philosophy, science and practical life, which charts a transient middle way between two stable and yet flawed attractors: reductionist materialism and transcendental idealism. I agree with Deleuze that Hume's philosophy of mind should be applauded for sketching out a theory of how self and subjectivity can constitute itself inside what is given to the mind, where the given is essentially identical with mind as such. This is a truly radical proposal. And although there is some movement in this direction within the enactive approach to cognitive science, as expressed, for instance, in terms of a growing appreciation of the foundational importance of the phenomenology of the lived body, these are only tentative beginnings. I am convinced, as Hume probably would have been, that the enactive approach to naturalizing phenomenology will eventually have to be complemented by a more serious phenomenologizing of nature.

We really appreciate your way of looking at Hume, that is without Kantian “glasses” which are so often put on by Hume’s researchers. Have you ever felt any objections against misinterpretations of other philosophers’ thoughts?

The proper interpretation of a great philosopher's work will always be controversial, and it is highly questionable to what extent we can actually ever claim to have found the definitive interpretation. This is especially so with Hume, whose work has been interpreted and used to defend pretty much any position in modern philosophy. I myself am also somewhat guilty of this, as I have tried to understand Hume's work from a variety of angles, including materialist naturalism, radical constructivism, and tran-

scendental phenomenology. But I finally settled on the current interpretation by referring to the perspective of Deleuze and the enactive approach to cognitive science (which also share a certain affinity, see Protevi 2010). I think that this interpretation is more viable than others, especially because they are coherent with a wider range of Hume's texts. The particular interpretation to which I felt most strongly opposed was the one proposed by Jerry Fodor (2003), who attempted to make a case for the computational theory of mind by focusing on one narrow aspect of Hume's philosophy of mind, namely the Theory of Ideas. Of course, as should be clear from what I have said in response to the previous question, I think that Fodor is making a fundamental mistake.

What, in your opinion, Hume would do, that Husserl wouldn't? I am asking about the limits of the phenomenological investigation, which was a domain of them both.

In order to answer this question I think we need to be careful to distinguish between the different phases of Husserl's work, which gave rise to distinct forms of phenomenology. If we consider some of Husserl's mid-stage research, then we find him applauding Hume for being the first to discover the phenomenological problem of constitution. But at the same time he would criticize Hume for not taking this discovery further into a transcendental direction. On the other hand, it is precisely on this point that Deleuze defends Hume against such a classical transcendental phenomenology, and commends his account of subjectivity and the process of constitution for staying within the domain of the given. In this regard I think that Hume would be much more open to a mutually informing exchange with enactive cognitive science, than would Husserl at this point in his career. But we should also not forget Husserl's later turn to the phenomenology of the life world, which situated the subject inside the given in a way that is much more reminiscent to Hume's project. It would be an interesting study to evaluate more precisely how the phenomenology of the later Husserl compares with Hume's work.

According to Hume's 'interactive' style of writing (he often communicates with the reader by asking him/her to confirm his claims within their own experience) what kind of skills could be trained or even gained with this practice, which would help in better understanding ourselves and the world?

This is a very interesting question that again nicely highlights Hume's continuing relevance to today's philosophy and science of mind. In fact, I believe that the development of the enactive approach to cognitive science, and of consciousness science more generally, will eventually force us to communicate in a way that is much more akin to Hume's interactive style. At the moment there are whole fields within cognitive science that are devoted to explaining certain assumed phenomena, although a careful and systematic examination of one's own experience can reveal these assumptions to be unfounded.

Take for instance the popular problem of other minds, according to which we perceive others as opaque material objects and whose status as others we only know through logical inference. But, as Hume would say, can you confirm this in your own experience? Please try this out for yourself: engage with another person and become aware of how you experience the other, not by abstracting but rather by more fully entering into the situation. Normally you should find that you encounter the other person as another person even before you can focus on some of their isolated physical properties. And note that this confirmation or refutation is not a matter of rational argument. It is a matter of a practical phenomenological inquiry. We have already discussed how reason alone cannot determine our actions. Here we see that reason by itself cannot determine our perceptions, either. No amount of reasoning alone can force any conclusion about what it is like to have any kind of experience. We have to generate the conditions for the appearance of the experience and then live through it.

I think that this is another nice example of how the enactive approach is following in Hume's footsteps and at the same time pushing his insights further. For example, you can find the interactive style of communication in Varela's adoption of Hans Jonas' existentialist appeal to our own felt concern for the teleological foundations of a bio-phenomenology (e.g. Weber and Varela 2002). In addition, the consequences of this kind of interactive style are also evident in Varela's promotion of a pragmatic engagement with phenomenological inquiry (e.g. Depraz, et al. 2003). In my own research I have developed this interactive style in a new direction by trying to design easily accessible technological interfaces, which could potentially facilitate the debate about the phenomenology of active perception (see Froese and Spiers 2007). What these developments show is that, like Hume foresaw, a proper science of the mind cannot be separated from praxis and experience.

In your text you defend enactivism against idealism (for which Hume is also accused). In the work of Pascal and O'Regan (2008) though, autopoietic enactivism of Varela is named to be idealist. How would you comment on that?

I disagree with the interpretation given by Pascal and O'Regan, but at least their commentary has the value of giving an explicit voice to a common misunderstanding of the enactive approach, especially of Varela's neuro-phenomenology method, and by extension also of phenomenology more generally. An assessment of this misinterpretation takes us back to what we already discussed in response to the first question about problems and their context of validity. Although at first sight Pascal and O'Regan appear to be defending some version of a materialist monism, their misinterpretation (and others of a similar kind) has nicely revealed how deeply dualistic the modern scientific context of understanding still is, even despite the popular disavowals to the contrary. Let us briefly consider what enables us to draw this implicit implication from the dispute.

The enactive approach rejects the standard materialist view, according to which the mind is *nothing but* brain activity, and argues that we should accept the existence of experience (and the experience of existence) as something to be explained in its own right. Now, for someone who is situated within a dualistic framework of understanding, the rejection of materialism can only entail its opposite, namely idealism. But this reversal simply misses the point that the enactive approach has shifted the entire frame of research into a different domain, namely as situated within our immediate and concrete lived experience. In other words, it has not chosen to defend the other side of the mind-body dualism, but has replaced the context in which the mind-body problem was originally formulated. Mental events and brain events are not seen as two independent substances, but rather as two aspects that can be distinguished and abstracted from within a more general situation of being in the world. This lived situation of being in the world is not some magical realm of ideal mental forms, but rather the situation in which we always already find ourselves engaged in, even before we engage in any kind of theoretical reflection. This is a kind of existential phenomenology, to be sure, but it is not idealism if by idealism we understand a reduction to a transcendental subject.

In your article there can be found only a brief note about the distinction between personal and subpersonal processes in Hume's philosophy. Don't you think that this distinction is not clearly stressed in works on enactivism?

The distinction between personal and subpersonal processes is as important as it is difficult. It is not always clear what is meant by the terms, which adds further confusion. If all that is meant is a distinction between a person conceived as a whole system and a person conceived in terms of a system of components, then I think that both Hume and the enactive approach make this relatively clear. In fact, Maturana and Varela have given us a workable operational definition of a systemic whole with their notion of autopoiesis.

However, the personal / subpersonal distinction becomes much more complicated as soon as we introduce phenomenological considerations. It is easy enough to identify the personal level with the psychological level in phenomenology. But what about the pre-reflective level in phenomenology, for instance Husserl's analysis of inner time consciousness? Should this be considered sub-personal because it is prior to the constitution of an ego? Or should we reserve the term sub-personal only for distinctions made by the natural sciences in the local ontology of material objects? The latter option conforms more closely to the current usage of the term in cognitive science, but there is also a growing need for a better recognition of the subpersonal level in our analysis of lived experience. Otherwise we have the problem that a phenomenology of the pre-reflective level, although it does not directly involve a cognitive subject, is easily misunderstood as some kind of psychologism or idealism. In addition, there is an important difference between unconscious experiential events,

which are unconscious in the sense that they are experiences that are not being reflected upon, and unconscious physical events, which are unconscious in the sense that they are not experiences in the first place.

And then we should also not forget that we can distinguish a level of intersubjectively shared processes as well. During social interactions we experience a shared situation of being with other persons, i.e. a second-person perspective, and the dynamics of these interactions place novel conditions and constraints on the behavior of the individuals. Since these phenomena cannot be reduced to one isolated person, it would make sense to refer to this level of analysis as suprapersonal. And yet it is also the case that in social interaction our bodies are physically entrained on what we might call the subpersonal level, and these dynamics influence events on the personal level from the bottom up.

Evidently, there is currently a great confusion of terms in cognitive science, but this is only natural given that it is such an interdisciplinary melting pot. Hume had it much easier in this respect since he only had to be consistent with himself. I think that the enactive approach has a rather healthy response to this complex situation by avoiding the premature imposition of any rigid hierarchies onto the different phenomena that we can distinguish. Indeed, instead of trying to place these phenomena on separate scales and levels ranging from above-personal to below-personal, from self-personal to other-personal, and from self-conscious to unconscious, it may be more helpful to think of a network of various phenomena. And, come to think of it, didn't Hume already say that the self is a bundle or collection of perceptions?

If you had a chance to ask or argue with Hume about anything, what would it be?

I would take the opportunity to thank him for his outstanding contributions to the general philosophical toolkit that we can all use in order to improve the way we think and live. Of course, I would also be delighted if we could debate the finer points of the enactive approach to cognitive science together.

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