Avant. The Journal of the Philosophical-Interdisciplinary Vanguard
Volume II, Number 1/2011 www.avant.edu.pl

Introduction

Victoria Stone

I have always been quite partial to fashion. I think of it as an expression of one's thoughts, ideas and personality. Perhaps this is why I have in the past been so attracted to accounts of cognition that like to call them selves "embodied" or "embedded" (Note that these terms ought not be mistaken to mean the same thing. I present them in a relation here merely because they are branches of a similar tree of thought). The central claim inherent in all of these views is that one ought to recognize the role of the body and the environment in human cognition. Indeed, despite their technical differences, all three of these views hold that the brain**,** body and world are "coupled". Brain, body and world are tied together in a dynamical loop within which some sort of special relationship holds. This has seemed to me as intuitively correct. Why?

Aspects of cognition, thoughts, ideas and concepts, do seem to be shaped by the aspects and form of one's body and surroundings. This is most apparent when we think about the nature of perception and the intuitive way in which one moves, responds to and navigates one's environment. For example, as the fog settles across the city one's visibility becomes impaired, so the driver responds intuitively by slowing down their vehicle and driving with caution. This action may be a consequence of one's being able to interpret and navigate one's environment, and this response may be a consequence of the fact that, somehow, the information that is out there in the world is effectively integrated with one's corresponding patterns of movement and thought.

The above ideas that are central to an embodied or embedded account of cognition are becoming increasingly familiar within the popular study of the philosophy of mind. The view has the upshot of accounting for the intuition that the mind is in some way connected to and (possibly) extends towards the environment. But even this view has

been around for some time now. Indeed, the great French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty understood vision as being analogous to touch in how it discerns the world, describing it as being like "palpation with the eyes". Alva Noë, (Professor of Philosophy, University of California, Berkeley), is sympathetic to this line of thought and recognises the similarities between Merleau Ponty's view and his own: "Through skilful visual probing – what Merleau-Ponty called "palpation with the eyes" – you bring yourself into contact […]. Vision is touch-like. Like touch, vision is active […]. We gain content by looking around just as we gain tactile content by moving our hands. You enact your perceptual content, through the activity of skilful looking" (*Action in Perception* 2004: 73). Noë famously advocates this view. Our phenomenal experience is enabled by active participation and engagement with the world in which we are situated.

Activity, *skilful looking*, *engagement* and *phenomenal content*. These terms are crucial.

But Noë's "sensorimotor theory", which evolved in collaboration with vision scientist and philosopher Kevin O'Regan (director of the Laboratoire de Psychologie de la Perception at the Université René Descartes, Paris), goes one step further than the claims made above. According to Noë (and O'Regan's) theory, phenomenal experience is not only the result of an active, reciprocal engagement with the world but is also the result of one's possession of a certain type of knowledge. This certain type of knowledge is known as "sensorimotor knowledge", or, more specifically, knowledge of "sensorimotor contingencies" that are present in the environment. In their own words, "[…] we shall say that perceivers have sensations in a particular sense modality, when they *exercise their mastery of the sensorimotor laws* that govern the relation between possible actions and the resulting changes in incoming information in that sense modality" (Noë and O'Regan 2001: 82).

The sensorimotor view extends outwards to Noë's exploration of the notion of "perceptual presence" (see esp. Noë 2004 and 2002, 2006 too). As an example of this phenomenon, consider that one almost always has the visual experience of a cube as having six sides despite only ever being able to see three of its façade's from any particular vantage point. In this example the hidden sides of the cube can be described as being "present in their absence". This is to say that the hidden sides are present in one's experience (one rarely doubts that a cube is hollow, or backless), even though they remain absent from view. Noë says that the sides of a cube hidden from one's view owe their presence in one's experience to one's possession of this special sensorimotor knowledge; the knowledge that the remaining three sides will be revealed with one's movement and exploration of the object: "When you see the cube from a particular vantage point, you encounter its aspect from that vantage point. As you move with respect to the cube, you learn how its aspect changes as you move –

that is; you encounter its visual potential. To encounter its visual potential is thus to encounter its actual shape. When you experience an object as cubical merely on the basis of its aspect, you do so because you bring to bear, in this experience, your sensorimotor knowledge of the relation between changes in cube aspects and movement. To experience the figure as a cube, on the basis of how it looks, is to understand how its look changes as you move" (2004: 77).

Alva Noë's philosophical investigations into the mind and cognition are scientifically informed. With the aforementioned philosopher and scientist Kevin O'Regan, Noë discusses the significance phenomenon such as "change blindness" and the experience of visual illusions may have for the sensorimotor theory. Why, for example, do we not notice a gorilla running through a football field when we are so engrossed in the game? (see: Noë 2002, 2009 and:

http://neuronarrative.wordpress.com/2009/05/30/you-are-not-your-brain-a-video-discussion-by-philosopher-alva-noe/).

All of this is contentious to the claim that consciousness may not simply be a product of millions of brain neurons firing but is the result of many complex processes, inside and outside the head, constantly interacting with the environment.

Alva Noë was also luck enough to have worked with the late professor Susan Hurley (University of Bristol, UK) on topics including the Brain Basis of Consciousness and Neural Plasticity (2003).

With these foundations under his belt, Noë has also in the past (2001) spread his philosophical wings into the subject area of Contemporary Art. The proposal here is that through the reflective experience of a piece of artwork we can learn a lot about consciousness. Art, according to Noë, gives us the opportunity to go beyond the apparent transparency of experience and towards the more feasible conception. Noë is also currently writing a book about art and human nature.

For a list of Noë's works, see: http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~noe/

Bibliography

Hurley, S. & Noë, A. 2003. *Neural plasticity and consciousness.* Biology and Philosophy, 18: 131–168.

Merleau-Ponty, M. 1945/2003. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge & Kegan, P.

Noë, A. 2009. *Out of Our Heads: Why you are not your brain and other lessons from the biology of consciousness.* Macmillan.

Noë, A 2004. *Action in Perception*. Cambridge. MA. MIT Press.

Noë, A 2002. *Is the visual world a grand illusion?* Imprint Acdemic.

Noë, A. 2001. *Experience and experiment in art.* Journal of Consciousness Studies, 7: 8-9: 123–135.

O'Regan, J.K. & Noë, A. 2001. *A Sensorimotor Approach to Vision and Visual Consciousness.* Behavioural and Brain Sciences, 24: 5: 939–973.