

Talk by Ezequiel di Paolo: „What ist the enactive body?“

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Seminarroom

Abstract

In spite of the several uses given to the term *embodiment* in modern approaches to cognition, psychology, neuroscience, psychiatry and anthropology, there is, if not a lack of a common referent, at least a certain vagueness about this word. There may be something to be said for people who suggests that such terms are mere placeholders for notions that are yet to be properly cashed out scientifically and phenomenologically, and that perhaps, because of this, such signifiers should be used less and less the more we can sharpen their vague content.

It is, however, certainly the case that whether their meanings are more or less vague, embodied perspectives have a certain common ground; they do seem to take a particular stance towards traditional problems in the philosophy and sciences of the mind and as such terms like body or embodiment are doing some work: the work of voicing certain common dissatisfactions and certain alternative views. Whether understood negatively (in terms of what they reject) or positively (in terms of how taking the body seriously makes a difference) the embodiment signifier may be vague but not empty.

In this talk, I will ask the question: *What is a body?* I will ask it from the enactive perspective. This approach has asked such fundamental questions before and has attempted to build up concepts like autonomy, agency, sense-making, and social interaction in similar styles: that is, by isolating essential organisational aspects that can be used to ground such concepts and give them articulated handles to combine and re-combine with other ideas. In short, by making them part of a novel theoretical framework.

In defining the enactive body, we must be careful not to particularise too much (e.g., restrict our definition to anatomical or phenomenological properties) and, instead, to attempt to capture the concept in a generative way (i.e., by describing conditions that if were allowed to be instantiated would normally lead to the phenomena we ascribe to bodies). As a word of caution, this is not meant as a closed definition of a body, since, as we shall see, one tricky aspect of embodiment is how particular instantiations re-signify the conditions that transform a body into a universal category. A specific, as yet unknown way of being a body may become a *sine qua non* of our conception of the term from the moment it makes its appearance in the world. The particular ways of being embodied matter and this is already an intuitive lesson from embodied critical perspectives. It is precisely the sort of movement from the particular into a universal, the passage from contingency to essence, that needs to be described, or rather the set of minimal conditions that will be able generate this sort of movement; this is what we shall term the *minimal enactive body*.

I propose and discuss three minimal requirements for a body concept: autonomy (self-sustained precarious identity of a multiplicity of component processes), plastic embeddedness within a relational domain (possibility of habits and self-transformation) and self-movement/self-affection (spontaneity and experience).