



Enactivism with Representationalism: A Lost Cause?

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Whereas lots of contemporary theories of embodied, embedded, distributed and extended cognition endorse representationalism (the thesis according to which cognition implies the production, storage or use of intracranial representations, be they symbols, subsymbols, minimal, action-oriented,...), Varela-Maturana-inspired enactivism does not. This foundational difference is puzzling, since “enactivism” is very often considered as a theoretical influence and/or blanket term for most of these theories.

In this talk, I will argue for the pressing need to use Varela and Maturana’s non-representationalist resources in our theoretical understanding of what “enactive, embodied, embedded, extended” cognition may be, this in critical contrast with contemporary representationalist versions of distributed, situated, embodied, embedded or extended cognition (brilliantly defended by authors such as A.Clark, M.Rowlands, R.Wilson, E.Hutchins or A.Noë).

I will first recall some classical arguments against representationalism, as we can find them in Maturana-Varela’s enactive theory of cognition, but also in some theories having interesting family resemblances with enactivism (pragmatism). These arguments are aimed at showing that mental representations *cannot* and *do not need* to exist, once we consider the autonomous character of the CNS, the peculiar nature of the theoretical stance leading us to understand the relations between the brain and the world in representational terms, and the origin of the contentfulness of representations.

Based on a consideration of the cognitive nature and role of external representations, I will then argue that, on pain of triviality, any account of genuine distributed or extended cognition should better not posit mental representations to explain cognition. Moreover, external and so-called “mental representations” are too different from each other to be part of a same representational kind. Surprisingly, it might then turn that it is only by being non-representationalist that any distributed account of cognition could be genuinely innovative.

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