



## Review of Sanneke de Haan, *Enactive Psychiatry*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020

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In *Enactive Psychiatry*, Sanneke de Haan operationalizes enactivist principles to offer a compelling new integrative framework for psychiatry. *Enactive Psychiatry* unpacks four dimensions – the physiological, the experiential, the existential and sociocultural – and shows how they together form the causal web of the “person-world system”. We are “bodily, reflexive beings interacting with [our] socioculturally shaped worlds” (De Haan, 2020 p. 195).

In the opening passages of her book, de Haan reflects on her puzzlement when first starting to work as a philosopher at a psychiatric hospital. At team meetings, staff would talk about how the patients were doing and feeling, their relations to partners, their participation in therapy and whether they had a job or not. At scientific meetings, the same staff would talk about the brain, trying to find out the mechanisms underlying a psychiatric disorder. This tension in the practice of psychiatry fuels what de Haan calls “psychiatry’s integration problem” (2020, p. xv): even the staunchest neuroreductionist needs to concede that *talking* to a patient might be helpful. And the existentialist should concede that directly intervening in the patient’s brain (as in Deep Brain Stimulation) can alter her being-in-the-world. But how can such heterogeneous phenomena that all play a role in the persistence and development of psychiatric disorders be integrated in one framework?

De Haan uses enactive principles to develop an answer to this question. But to consider *Enactive Psychiatry* an application of existing enactive ideas to the field of psychiatry would be to sell the book short. It might be better to think of psychiatric practice as a sharpening stone to push a number of enactivist ideas quite a bit forward. The result is not only an integrative framework for psychiatry, but also what I consider to be a genuinely novel and outstanding branch on the enactivist tree.

De Haan presents *Enactive Psychiatry* as a philosophical work that is not written mainly for philosophers. It is addressed to those working in mental health care and those who find themselves affected by psychiatric disorders. By avoiding excessive jargon,

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sticking to a set of intuitive metaphors and taking the time to explain complex ideas, she succeeds in offering an accessible treatment for a non-specialist audience. This management of expectations matters: in *Enactive Psychiatry*, you will not find detailed comparisons of how de Haan's branch compares to other branches that recently grew out of the enactive trunk, (such as Hutto & Myin (2017), Gallagher (2017), Di Paolo et al. (2017), Di Paolo et al. (2018), Fuchs (2017)). Instead, De Haan's interlocutors are more global: she situates her kind of model as an alternative to neuroreductionism and the biopsychosocial model. Her conversation partners in discussing values are Frankfurt (2004) & Taylor (2000). For this reason, *Enactive Psychiatry* might serve as an excellent introduction for those not already convinced of the merits of the enactive approach while simultaneously being a quite provocative read for the seasoned enactivist.

As this review will hopefully show, there is plenty of philosophical meat on the psychiatric bone. Aftab (2020) provides an excellent review of *Enactive Psychiatry* from a psychiatrist's perspective. In this review, I will try to flesh out some of the most novel philosophical aspects of *Enactive Psychiatry*.

## 1 Existential sense-making (Chapters 5 and 6)

One of the most central concepts in contemporary enactivism is sense-making. Sense-making is every living being's basic capability to (within limits) distinguish between what is supportive and what is detrimental to its existence. To be alive is to structure your interactions in ways that support your existence. A consequence of this starting point is the life-mind continuity thesis: some form of mindedness is there from the very beginning of life; and mindedness in any form is intrinsically related to the self-organizing character of living beings. Sense-making and the mind-life continuity thesis help to move away from an anthropocentric perspective on cognition to a more biocentric perspective. Of course, we have a variety of capacities and values, but, fundamentally, we are all (from bacteria to Bach) sense-makers.

De Haan argues for a qualitative shift within this continuity. On the one hand there are basic sense-makers: "animals that are fully absorbed by the here and now of their situation and sensations" (De Haan, 2020, p.124). On the other hand, we find existential sense-makers, a class of beings that are able to take an "existential stance" that can relate to their relation with the world. This shift is transformative, all-pervasive and constitutes a new form of (situated) agency:

The freedom that is opened up by our ability to take a stance does not annul the ways in which we are determined by our bodies and worlds: it is rather from this specific anchoring that we can start to reflect on ourselves and our situation. Which in turn opens up the space to start doing things differently, to choose to lay down a different path in walking. And once this possibility is on the table we have to position ourselves. Or rather, we inevitably do position ourselves: even not doing anything has become an act, even not choosing is a choice. Sartre (1943/1996, p.553) referred to the unavoidability of stance-taking with his famous assertion that we are 'condemned to be free'. (De Haan, 2020, p.126).

The existential stance is central to psychiatry. With the existential stance comes an “*existential vulnerability*” (De Haan, 2020, p.129). In fact, De Haan argues, our stance-taking capacities are the very condition of possibility for both the development of psychiatric disorders as well as their treatment through psychotherapy. In psychiatric disorders “our integrity as persons is at stake” (De Haan, 2020, p.201).

De Haan’s development on the existential stance at the same time exposes a deep tension between enactivism’s commitments to both biological self-organization and (existential) phenomenology. At first sight, the discontinuity de Haan highlights seems deeply at odds with the mind-life continuity thesis, putting the human back on a pedestal raised above the rest of animality.<sup>1</sup> Still, de Haan’s discontinuity finds substantial support in phenomenology: Plessner’s (1928/1981) ‘excentric position’, Heidegger’s (1927/1978) conceptualization of Dasein, Merleau-Ponty’s (1942/1963) distinction between the living and the human order all highlight aspects of the existential stance.

Even Hans Jonas, probably the most bio-centered phenomenologist, writes in *The Phenomenon of Life*:

In reflection upon self the subject-object split which began to appear in animal evolution reaches its extreme form. It has extended into the center of feeling life, which is now divided against itself. Only over the immeasurable distance of being his own object can man “have” himself. (Jonas, 1966/2001, p.186).

The existential stance is nowhere articulated as clearly as in *Enactive Psychiatry*, but traces of it can be found in various parts of the contemporary literature. For example, Di Paolo et al. (2018) write in *Linguistic Bodies*:

For linguistic bodies, keeping the course of one’s life coherent for oneself is the inherited and ontologically definitive struggle. Whether and to what extent this becomes a self-conscious, salient pursuit of authenticity—that is, an ethical endeavor—is undetermined; it need not befall every linguistic body as such. But it can, and that is part of the point. (Di Paolo, et al., 2018).

As mentioned, this is not the kind of book that picks in-crowd fights, but it would be interesting to see the convergence and difference between de Haan’s transformation of sense-making into existential sense-making and other contemporary enactivist work on participatory (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007) and linguistic sense-making (Di Paolo, et al., 2018).

## 2 Relational realism (Chapters 3 and 6)

Two conceptual shifts occur simultaneously with the shift to existential sense-making: a shift from animal-environment system to person-world system and a shift from valence to value. Valences are implied by a living being’s metabolism: an aspect of the environment is valenced positive if it is supportive of its existence,

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<sup>1</sup> I should add that de Haan is concerned with characterizing the existential stance in humans. She leaves open the possibility that some aspects of the existential stance are not unique to humans.

and negative if it is detrimental. Values are implied by a living being's relation to its relation with the environment.

The shift from valance to value is all-pervasive. Once we enter the existential domain, there is no going back. Sometimes we explicitly reflect on our existential predicament. But most of the time (when we are busy doing other things) we are *existentialised* sense-makers (De Haan, 2020, p. 148). When making my coffee in the morning, preparing myself for another day working from home, I cannot help but express something like "it-all-does-not-really-matter-anymore-but-I-still-kind-of-care-about-my-espresso".

In developing a nuanced account of valence and value, de Haan distances herself from other enactivists. The standard sense-making terminology easily slips "into a subjectivist conception of meaning being 'projected' by the organism onto a neutral world" (De Haan, 2020, p. 56). Instead, de Haan considers valences to be "relational realities" (De Haan, 2020, p. 171). That the mouse *is* edible for the fox is a relational fact. This fact is independent of the fox's actual sense-making. De Haan's relational realism is reminiscent of the realism found in ecological psychology: the chair affords sitting for a grown human, even if no one currently perceives it as sittable.<sup>2</sup>

The story is slightly more complicated for values. Values are not implied by metabolism, but are implied by "the configuration of a specific person, with her specific history of interactions, her specific bodily experiences, her specific sociocultural upbringing and the specific sociocultural community of which she is part. But *given* this particular person with this particular history in this particular world, some things simply *are* valuable to her" (De Haan, 2020, p. 171, italics in original). The relational realism of values does justice to what one might call the "thrownness" of everyday experience: "[w]e do not choose our values: we rather find ourselves compelled by them" (De Haan, 2020, p. 175).

The relational account of values de Haan presents threatens to be at once *too realist* and *not realist enough* (and, one might think, therefore exactly containing the right amount of realism). If values are implied by a specific person with a specific history in a specific situation, then there seems to be no room for ambiguity. In moments of existential choice the determinacy and priority of values seems to be exactly what is at stake. When confronted with a murder, do I lie to the police or betray my friend? At such a moment of choice the values of loyalty and truthfulness clash. While finding myself compelled by these opposing values, I am simultaneously *determining* them. I cannot seriously see myself as a truthful person once I have lied to the police and perhaps I never *really* was truthful. My decision will partly shape what kind of person I am and perhaps always have been. De Haan's relational realism could go well with a more open-ended, less determinate, conception of values, but this would diminish the robust realism she seeks.

On the other hand, de Haan distances herself from Taylor's all-too-realist conception of value. De Haan sees Taylor as defending a view in which "values are *intrinsic* to the things we value" (De Haan, 2020, p. 175). For Taylor, this objectivism is

<sup>2</sup> De Haan's approach here is representative of a broader philosophical movement trying to bridge enactivism and ecological psychology (Chemero, 2009; Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014; Withagen, et al., 2017).

required to prevent moral relativism. If values are relative to a form of life, we are in no position to dispute and challenge the values held in a different form of life. We would have no *objective* ground to condemn those who deny women the same rights as men. Hence, values must be both form of life-independent and somehow accessible to us from within a form of life. Dreyfus & Taylor (2015) attempt to square such moral objectivism with the enactive idea that all knowing is situated, embodied and practice-permeated. Contra Taylor (and Dreyfus), De Haan thinks we can avoid such relativism without presupposing objective values:

An enactive, relational account of values allows for the possibility of development and progress: we can improve our stance-taking skills, our empathy, and our moral sensitivity precisely by interacting with others. Yet there is no ‘objective measure’, no ‘superhuman’ or ‘supernatural yardstick’ to compare our values against. (De Haan, 2020, p. 178).

The question is, of course, whether we can make sense of “improved” moral sensitivity without a practice-independent standard.

Although perhaps not the definitive answer, De Haan’s relational realism does trigger the right kind of questions: how to avoid moral-relativism while embracing practice-relativism and simultaneously not giving up on naturalism? This is the narrow path enactivism laid out for itself. De Haan’s treatment is exceptionally sensitive to these issues.

### 3 Causality and emergence (Chapters 4 and 8)

The main driving force behind *Enactive Psychiatry* is psychiatry’s integration problem: to do justice to both the physiological and experiential dimensions of psychiatric disorders. These two dimensions are typically framed in terms of two different realms (mind and matter, neuronal and mental, etc.) that somehow need to come into causal contact with each other. One of the more popular options in enactivist circles is to appeal to downward or circular causality (Thompson & Varela, 2001) between a local (physiological) process and a global (experiential) process. Although circular causality might be an improvement over supervenience, such a conception of emergence easily leaves the dichotomy between experience and physiology intact.

Borrowing from Humphreys’s (1996) account of emergence as fusion, de Haan develops what I take to be a genuinely novel approach to tackling the mind–body problem. Rather than directly trying to glue them together, De Haan construes the physiological and the experiential as both standing “in a mereological relation to the more encompassing system of a person interacting with her world” (De Haan, 2020, p. 121). As a result, it would be mistaken to assume a causal relation *between* physiology and experience. Instead, we are looking at an organizational form of causality.

To illustrate this form of causality, de Haan appeals to the familiar yet (surprisingly) rich example of baking a cake. As everyone who likes to deviate from a recipe knows, the structure of a cake is crucially dependent on the ratio of its ingredients.

Adding an extra egg to the dough will affect the sponge – and thereby the cake as a whole. The added sugar or the added egg do not work ‘on’ the cake like one domino hitting another, but rather by being part of the cake a change in the amount of sugar or eggs is a change of the cake as a whole. (De Haan, 2020, p. 100).

Besides the local influence of ingredients on the cake, more global influences have an influence on the structure of the cake as well:

By heating the cake, we change the cake as a whole – including its ingredients. Moreover, the effect of the heating on the cake will depend on the very ingredients it is made of and how these ingredients have been mixed and handled. It is not as if the heat changes the cake (the whole) and this in turn changes the properties of the ingredients (the parts). The whole consists of its parts, and intervening with the whole implies influencing its parts. (De Haan, 2020, p. 101).

Whereas adding an extra egg is a local-to-global influence, adding some extra baking time is a global-to-local influence. These influences together make a cake, and we would be wrong in trying to discern a hierarchy of organizational levels within the cake. In fact, it seems that De Haan’s crustulatory metaphysics would dictate that although the cake would still *contain* sugar, sugar would not be a *part* of the cake: the ingredients have *become* the cake. As far as mereological relations go, this is a rather quaint one.

With the cake example, de Haan arrives at a flat ontology in which experience and physiology are qualitatively different mereological parts of the same entity: a person in her environment. Of course, the cake example has its limitations: whereas a cake is finished at some point, humans (by enactive definitions) are not. The explanatory leap from a cake baking in the oven to a diachronically self-organizing person-world process is considerable. De Haan’s cake might need some further processing, but as a thinking tool it is delightful.

De Haan’s flat ontology further takes shape in the last chapter of the book where she shows how her approach can be practically operationalized using tools from the network approach to psychiatry (Borsboom, 2017). Her enactive network model can integrate the four dimensions involved – the physiological, the experiential, the existential and sociocultural – without assigning a causal priority to one of those dimensions.

## 4 Conclusion

Having presented the main philosophical movements in *Enactive Psychiatry*, the question is what difference the book will make for psychiatric practice. Here, De Haan turns the tables: her aim is not to revolutionize psychiatry with the conceptual framework that she outlines. On the contrary, the conceptual framework is custom-made for those mental health professionals who (already) work “holistically in a pragmatic and eclectic way” (De Haan, 2020, p.xi). *Enactive Psychiatry* tries to do justice to an existing humanistic and holistic way of working in psychiatry. It aims to alleviate the tension between psychiatric practice and the dominant single-aspect and reductionistic models. Alleviating this tension is not just relevant for

philosophical consistency but has very practical ramifications: it might help explain treatment decisions, communicate with health insurers or obtain funding.

Above all, *Enactive Psychiatry* is a thoroughly humanistic book. The ethical principle behind enactivism is *precariousness*: a vulnerability that all living beings have in common in their relation with their environment. Humans, as existentialized sense-makers, are vulnerable in their relation to both the world and themselves in ways that other living beings are not. This existential vulnerability is what is at stake in psychiatry, and is felt throughout the book. *Enactive Psychiatry* offers a deeply compassionate investigation of the philosophical foundations for a scientifically-informed holistic psychiatry.

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