

# Open Peer Commentaries

## on Sebastjan Vörös and Michel Bitbol's "Enacting Enaction"

### Enaction Without Hagiography

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> **Upshot** • Vörös and Bitbol provide a helpful account of the depths of enaction but their hagiographic rhetoric and neglect of important historical facts and recent developments work at cross-purposes to their account.

« 1 » Sebastjan Vörös and Michel Bitbol are to be commended for their helpful account of the concept of enaction. As they emphasize, the motivation behind this concept has been to articulate a non-dual mode of thinking that can generate new scientific research and philosophical investigations, while being rooted in existential transformation. "Non-dual" means beyond dichotomies such as mind and body, self and world, subject and object, organism and environment, and nature and nurture; it also means a mode of thinking that seeks to perform what it describes and to describe what it performs. In *The Embodied Mind*, Francisco Varela, Eleanor Rosch and I described this way of thinking as one that tries to create a "circulation" between cognitive science and human experience (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 2016: lxi).

« 2 » "Enaction" was the key word we used to create this circulation. As Vörös and Bitbol explain, the word was never meant to be just a theoretical term that referred to perception-action coupling, embodied action, autonomous agency, and so forth – the cluster of ideas that are now taken to define "enactivism" as a theoretical framework in cognitive science. Rather, the word "enaction" was also always intended to be perfor-

mative – to be a way to put into play the realization that cognition and experience have no ground beyond their own accumulated history of embodied action. "Enaction" was meant to express this realization not only in the ongoing work of science and philosophy but also in the existential setting of our own lived experience. Thus, the word was also used evocatively, to evoke an orientation or sensibility that would change how we think about and relate to our own minds in science and everyday life.

« 3 » As Vörös and Bitbol discuss, these multifaceted meanings and purposes of the concept of enaction sometimes have been missed. In some hands, enaction has been flattened into another theoretical "ism." (For my part, I have tried to avoid using the terms "enactivism" and "enactivist," preferring instead simply to speak of the "enactive approach.") Vörös and Bitbol have done an important service in reminding everyone of the deeper and imbricated layers of enaction.

« 4 » Vörös and Bitbol are also to be praised for their presentation of how the concept of enaction fits into the rest of Varela's work. Especially insightful is how they relate enaction to his early paper, "Not One, Not Two" (Varela 1976), which can be used as a metonym for his thought altogether. I remember reading this paper with wonder and fascination when it was first published in *Coevolution Quarterly*, just after I met Varela at the "Mind in Nature" conference organized by my father, William Irwin Thompson, and Gregory Bateson at the Lindisfarne Association (see Thompson 2004). I scrutinized the paper intensively again as an undergraduate student at Amherst College, trying to map the relations between it and Madhyamaka Buddhist philosophy, which I was studying at the time.

Varela and I had had many conversations about Madhyamaka, and it was exciting as a young student to try to work out the connections. I make these personal comments to convey my happiness in seeing Vörös and Bitbol highlight "Not One, Not Two."

« 5 » I write this commentary not just to praise, however, but also to criticize. Vörös and Bitbol's target article has a hagiographic rhetoric that hinders rather than helps the enactive approach. The article is so full of reverence that it neglects both important historical facts about the formation of the enactive approach and important developments since Varela's death.

### History versus hagiography

« 6 » The concept of enaction, specifically its presentation in *The Embodied Mind*, was the result of an intensive collaboration, taking place over several years, first between Varela and me, and then also with Eleanor Rosch. Needless to say, Varela is the *sine qua non* for the enactive approach. Nevertheless, the concept of enaction and its presentation emerged from a collaboration between a neurobiologist, a philosopher, and a cognitive psychologist, all of whom shared a commitment to contemplative practice and to the importance of the Buddhist philosophical tradition. An article with the title "Enacting Enaction" should acknowledge this history, instead of giving the impression that Varela was the sole parent of enaction. I take issue with these words from Footnote 1:

“individual authors differ considerably in how strongly, if at all, they subscribe to Varela's original ideas. Some scholars such as John Stewart and Evan Thompson could be said to be (at least in principle) aligned with Varela's original conceptions [...].”

As just mentioned, enaction has three parents. For example, the passage that Vörös and Bitbol quote in §30 from *The Embodied Mind* (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 2016: 228) was originally drafted by Eleanor Rosch. Furthermore, to describe me as “aligned” with Varela’s “original conceptions” is odd and inappropriate. First, the conceptions we are discussing were in part authored by me, and I have continued developing them by myself and in collaboration with others. So, my relationship to them is not one of mere alignment. Second, and more importantly, the value of the conceptions today does not reside in whether they remain aligned with Varela’s thought from two decades ago but rather in how they have been developed over the years, the work they do now, and the work they can do in the future through further development.

« 7 » Vörös and Bitbol end their target article by calling attention to the “depths ignored or forgotten,” to “what was lost along the way,” and to what can be attained by “reviving the impetus of Varela’s original proposal and eliminating the blind spot that one encounters in many, if not most, contemporary enactivist approaches” (§47). I have already commented on how the “original proposal” came from collaborative work and should not be affixed solely to Varela’s name. Certainly, some so-called “enactivists” have used the word “enaction” to their own ends that bear little or no resemblance to the enactive approach as we proposed it in *The Embodied Mind* and as it was developed subsequently by Varela and the other researchers mentioned below. Nevertheless, I must disagree with the claim that the depths of enaction have been ignored or forgotten and lost along the way. Important advances have been made by various researchers across a range of disciplines; I will give examples shortly. The main reason I object to Vörös and Bitbol’s neglect of this work (they cite none of it) is that it fosters a cultish image of Varela rather than calling attention to the living legacy of his ideas. He is presented not as an inspiring figure for a rich, multifarious, and evolving lineage of research, which now includes new and younger scientists and scholars who did not know or meet him, but rather as a singular figure whose deeper message has

been mostly unheard, misunderstood, or ignored. Such an image is hagiographic, not scientific.<sup>1</sup>

### Research guided by enaction

« 8 » I turn now to research inspired by and attuned to the full meaning of enaction. I begin by calling attention to Vörös and Bitbol’s important point that

“enaction [...] stands for a conceptual embodiment of a *dialectical symbiosis* between the theoretical and experiential subject [...] and as such, already ‘points beyond’ the naturalized framework into which it has been operationally incorporated.” (§34)

Vörös and Bitbol here are concerned with the relationship between the actual experiencing subject (“experiential subject”) and the subject as represented in a scientific model of cognition (“theoretical subject”). In the enactive approach, the theoretical subject is the embodied agent, understood as a sense-making being that enacts (brings forth) its own world of meaning (relevance). The experiential subject, however, is not just the referent of the scientific model, but also the “meta-subject” who enacts the mapping between its own self-experience (including its experience of other beings) and its objectified model of the subject as an embodied agent. One of the central features of the enactive approach (which it shares with second-order cybernetics) is that it strives to remain mindful of this reflexive mapping and its concrete situatedness in the life-world. In *The Embodied Mind*, we called this whole situation the “fundamental circularity,” and we

1 | The target article’s repeated and fulsome invocation of Martin Heidegger exacerbates its hagiographic tone. Heidegger, though an important philosopher, was reprehensible ethically and politically. The relationship between his philosophy and his Nazism and anti-Semitism remains a complicated question for Heidegger scholarship (Farin & Malpas 2016). Varela was well aware of the question of the “Heidegger affair,” and in his later work he drew much more from Husserl and Merleau-Ponty (contrary to what §5 suggests). It is striking that the target article, especially in its final section on ethics, makes no mention of these issues concerning Heidegger.

called the attitude of being mindful of the fundamental circularity, “embodied reflection” and “mindful, open-ended reflection” (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 2016: 30f). Vörös and Bitbol write that the enactive “meta-subject” is able to identify reflectively and empathetically with the enactive theoretical subject, because both are understood in terms of “sense-making,” that is, as bringing forth meaning through embodied action. This understanding points beyond any naturalized framework, because naturalism is only one moment or turn in the fundamental circularity – the one in which the experiential subject reflectively inscribes itself into nature in the form of its own objectified scientific models. Such a moment or turn, however, cannot account for the fundamental circularity as such (the ongoing dialectical symbiosis between the experiential and the theoretical subjects). In philosophical terms, naturalism overlooks and cannot account for the necessary conditions of its own possibility.

« 9 » The reason that I call attention to these ideas, which sharply distinguish “enaction” as a non-dual and transcendental style of thought from “enactivism” as a naturalistic philosophy, is that, far from having been ignored or forgotten, they have been central not only to my own work (Thompson 2007, 2011, 2015) but also to Ezequiel Di Paolo’s (see especially Di Paolo 2005, 2009, in press). For example, we both discuss them extensively in relation to Hans Jonas’s statement that “life can be known only by life” (Jonas 1966), which is another way of expressing the fundamental circularity and dialectical symbiosis between the experiential and the theoretical subjects.

« 10 » Let me mention a few other examples of research guided by the full meaning of enaction. I have already mentioned Di Paolo but his work deserves special mention. Di Paolo has done an enormous amount to extend and enrich Varela’s ideas about autopoiesis, autonomy, and sense-making, as well as to foster new work on enaction (see, e.g., Di Paolo 2005, 2009, in press). His work covers the important themes of life-mind continuity, social cognition, play, and habits (Di Paolo, Rohde & De Jaegher 2010). It deploys “enaction” not just as a theoretical term but also as an open-ended performative and evocative notion.

« 11 » Some of this work, specifically the development of the idea of social enaction as “participatory sense-making,” has been done in collaboration with Hanne De Jaegher (De Jaegher & Di Paolo 2007; De Jaegher, Di Paolo & Gallagher 2010), who deserves mention in her own right for her theoretical and pragmatic phenomenological work on intersubjectivity and social enaction. I call attention especially to her creation of a systematic, hands-on method for investigating the experience of interacting with others, in which “researchers of social understanding are themselves one of the best tools for their own investigations” (De Jaegher et al. 2017: 491). This work is clearly animated by the full meaning of enaction as requiring not just a change in how we think but also in how we experience.

« 12 » Another important methodological advance is the “phenomenological interview” created by Simon Høffding and Kristian Martiny (2016). This qualitative interview method responds directly to Varela’s call for better pragmatics in the investigation of experience in phenomenology and cognitive science. It advances beyond the “microphenomenological interview” (“entretien d’explicitation”) favoured by Michel Bitbol and Claire Petitmengin (2013a). Whereas the explicitation method rests on the problematic assumption that one is recapturing or re-enacting the already elapsed prereflective experience, rather than constructing a new experience (which, of course, may have its own value), Høffding & Martiny’s “phenomenological interview” explicitly understands that the experience produced by the interview is co-generated by the interviewer and the interviewee. In short, whereas the explicitation interview retains a kind of retrospective reification, the phenomenological interview is fully enactive.

« 13 » Let me also mention Miriam Kyselo’s important work applying enaction to understanding the self in the cases of locked-in syndrome (Kyselo 2013; Kyselo & Di Paolo 2013) and schizophrenia (Kyselo 2015).

« 14 » Finally, I would like to call attention to an older paper by Eleanor Rosch, on concepts (Rosch 1999), which deserves the same kind of attention that Vörös and Bitbol give to Varela’s writings.

### Enaction and Buddhist philosophy

« 15 » Vörös and Bitbol write as if the link between Buddhism and cognitive science via enaction is a finished product, rather than a work in progress, and as if it raised no problems of its own. As I discuss in my Introduction to the new edition of *The Embodied Mind* (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 2016), however, our presentation of enaction in relation to Buddhist philosophy and mindfulness practice has limitations that can now be seen in hindsight and in the light of the accumulated experience of the past few decades (see also Thompson 2017<sup>2</sup>). For example, we uncritically depict Buddhist philosophy as based directly on meditation or as deriving directly from meditative experience, whereas the relationship between the two is far more complicated conceptually and historically. Our mode of presentation uncritically belongs to what scholars now call “Buddhist modernism” (Sharf 1995; McMahan 2008). My point here is not to criticize Buddhist modernism *per se*, but rather to indicate that it is a problem area that requires careful critical reflection, something that is lacking in *The Embodied Mind* and in Varela’s thought. Acknowledgment of this problem area is missing from Vörös and Bitbol’s target article too; instead, they uncritically repeat the Buddhist modernist perspective. The new edition of *The Embodied Mind* also includes a new Introduction by Rosch. She helpfully distinguishes between “Phase 1 Enaction,” which refers to how enaction has been taken up in cognitive science, and “Phase 2 Enaction,” which highlights the non-dual perspective of concern also to Vörös and Bitbol. She relates both phases of enaction to the boom of interest in mindfulness practices and the neuroscience of meditation. It is unfortunate that Vörös and Bitbol do not consider these new reflections on enaction. Their neglecting them creates an impression of enaction as a static idea rather than an evolving mode of thought and practice requiring critical vigilance.

2] As well as my entries “The embodied mind: an introduction,” “The embodied mind in hindsight,” “The enactive approach,” and “Mindfulness and the enactive approach” on *The Brains Blog*, <http://philosophyofbrains.com>.

« 16 » Finally, I must mention a glaring problem that Vörös and Bitbol completely avoid in their final section on ethics (§45). They are correct that the enactive view of cognition lends support to considering the importance of ethical know-how. They go on, however, to make a stronger and problematic claim: “If the experience of one’s own identity co-emerges with that of somebody else, it becomes obvious that this bilateral relation has to be made harmonious and conducive to the blossoming of both poles.” But the consequent is not obvious at all. Consider bilateral relations in which each party recognizes that its identity is dependent on the other’s identity, while extreme inequity and harm exist in their relationship (as in Hegel’s master-slave dialectic or the relationship between the torturer and the tortured).

« 17 » Vörös and Bitbol continue:

“Moreover, as Varela insisted, if a human being is [...] taken as she shows up in the moment of the relational co-emergence, then tenderness and receptivity spontaneously arise [...]” (§45)

Once again, the consequent does not obviously follow. It is far from clear that there is a necessary connection between the realization of groundlessness and the spontaneous arising of compassion (the suggestion otherwise is another limitation of some passages in *The Embodied Mind*). On the contrary, one could argue that the reason that both wisdom (or insight) and compassion always have to be cultivated in tandem is that there is no entailment from one to the other; each one is *sui generis*, though they can and must inform each other. In the context of Buddhist philosophy, the precise relationship between “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) is a complicated and difficult issue on which there has been a range of views. Does compassion reside within emptiness or is it an adornment? To put the question another way, does the fundamental nature of mind – its “clarity” and “emptiness” or “openness” – already include compassion, or is compassion something extra? There is widespread disagreement about how to answer these questions across the full range of Buddhist philosophy and contemplative practice systems. Buddhist modernism has been largely oblivious to these

issues. Varela's book, *Ethical Know-How* (Varela 1999a), also neglects them (as does Varela 1999b). Vörös and Bitbol uncritically do the same thing. They repeat Varela's ideas without subjecting them or the substantive and difficult issues that they raise to critical analysis. This is another way in which their article is hagiographic.

« 18 » In conclusion, Vörös and Bitbol have done an important service in bringing the depths of enaction into view. Unfortunately, their hagiography works at cross-purposes to this aim.

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## “Dialectical Dance” and “Dialectical Star”: What Exactly Are We Talking About?

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**> Upshot** • In this commentary, though I agree with most of Vörös and Bitbol's statements about Varela's work, I ask the authors both for a clarification regarding their concept of dialectic and whether their understanding of this concept should lead us to accept their view according to which no further attempt to “find a *theoretical fix* [...] to solve the mind-body problem” is needed (§26).

« 1 » Sebastjan Vörös and Michel Bitbol provide us with a substantial attempt to understand the work of Francisco Varela, from

its very beginning (or almost) until its latest developments, in a consistent manner. I was also happy to read their target article because they put forward the concept of “dialectic” and try to understand Varela's work from it. However, while I am glad about this philosophical move, I also think that substantial work regarding their notion of “dialectic” is still needed if they want their attempt to be completely understandable and meaningful. *Dialectic* is indeed probably one of the most difficult and polysemous concepts in the whole history of metaphysics<sup>1</sup> and I found myself lacking a substantial definition of this concept I could rely on by reading their article. Given that they made it the key concept of their analysis to understand Varela's “genuine radicality” (§47), one legitimately expects a proper conceptual undertaking with regard to the dialectic.

« 2 » One can nevertheless find general indications of what they mean by dialectic. They describe the “dialectical (self-referential) movement” as an “operative and productive” “on-going circularity/recursivity” (§11). One can, moreover, read indicative metaphors like the “dialectical Star” (§22) or “the dialectical dance of being and knowing” (§40), but they seem insufficient (what do these expressions exactly *mean*?). Also, one could say that the content of their concept of dialectic is provided by their progressive analysis of Varela's work, which can implicitly be understood as the description of what they mean by “dialectic” (see especially §§22, 25, 26 and 34). The problem is that implicit statements, metaphors and general definitions leave us still far from a properly philosophical concept. Moreover, even if I simply relied on a reconstruction of their concept of dialectic, a much more important issue needs to be resolved. This issue is twofold.

« 3 » First, dialectic is not only a very difficult concept to define but also, as Renaud Barbaras shows, a very problematic one: in his early work, Merleau-Ponty tried to “solve” the “issue of [...] embodiment”

1| There are indeed huge differences between the ways “dialectic” is conceived by, among others, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel, Maurice Merleau-Ponty or Theodor Adorno, and none of these conceptions seems to be the one Vörös and Bitbol endorse.

with a “dialectical perspective,” the problem being that “dialectic comes here to fill the gap between what is to be thought and the series of dualities from which we try to think it [...], in doing so, it conceals a difficulty rather than solving it” (Barbaras 2001: 158; my translation). In other words, we could raise the objection to the authors, with Barbaras, that, without a clearly defined concept of dialectic that shows precisely how their enacted enaction does better than being “the clue of a problem, the name of what is to be thought,” it is “not a solution” (Barbaras 2008: 367; my translation). How do they convince us that their notion of “dialectical movement” is more than the simple “clue of a problem”? The question being, in my opinion, an undoubtedly legitimate one, given that Varela's conception of cognition as a co-emergence (§§18, 45), which Vörös and Bitbol write about, is in a certain sense a rephrasing of Merleau-Ponty's conception<sup>2</sup> of embodiment, which is precisely what Barbaras is criticizing here.

« 4 » Second, let us take for granted that Vörös and Bitbol's concept of dialectic can answer the problem pointed out by Barbaras. As they conceive it, “*enacting the enaction*” (§26) leads to “a constant synergy between the content of the theory and the mode of being of the theoretician” (§34), this synergy is what allows neurophenomenology to be “transformative” (ibid.), and then, consequently, “the non-dual dialectical logic helps us *express and evoke* the non-dualist existential stance” (§28), this “non-dualist existential stance,” as “the lived non-duality of being and knowing,” (§38) appearing to be the crux of the matter.

« 5 » Indeed, as they write: “The interplay of knowledge and being [...] cannot be subsumed under yet another conceptual (theoretical) Star, but requires a living manifestation of the *practical (existential) Star*” given that we just “*dissolve[d]* the *impression* of there being a [‘hard’] prob-

2| I am of course not the only one to point this out and to emphasize that this is not surprising, given that Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch explicitly claim to be Merleau-Pontyean at the beginning of their well-known *The Embodied Mind* (1991); on that point, see Étienne Bimbenet (2011: 239) or Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi (2012: 5).