

What is the Enactive Account of the Human Self? A Way out of the Body–Social Problem in Cognitive Science

In the philosophy of cognitive science, the *body–social problem* is the question, raised by Miriam Kyselo and Ezequiel di Paolo, of how bodily and social dimensions jointly figure in the individuation of the human self as a whole. On the one hand, to overcome the limits of the isolating individualism of much modern Western thought, which conceives of human selves (and minds) as fundamentally separate, self-contained entities, we need to find a way to understand ourselves that recognizes the fundamental importance of our connectedness with others. On the other hand, we cannot however escape the recognition that our identity is grounded in our concrete embodiment in a distinct living body. If we are inescapably social beings, yet undeniably embodied, how can these dimensions be integrated in a coherent account of what we are?

For Miriam Kyselo and Michelle Maiese, the enactive approach to cognitive science, an influential framework that emphasizes both the openness and the fundamental embodiment of living/minded beings, is the best suited to provide a satisfying answer to the body-social problem. They offer two contrasting “enactive accounts of the human self.” Kyselo (2014, 2016, 2020) argues that the human self is primarily a social existence: a self-sustaining network of social relations mediated, however, by the living body. Maiese (2016, 2018, 2022), by contrast, defends the primacy of embodiment. For her, the human self is an embodied organism, normatively shaped, however, by its social environment. Their disagreement revolves around one crucial point: for Kyselo, social relationships are constitutive of our identity; for Maiese, this is not the case and the individual is only socially embedded/shaped, not constituted.

Both Kyselo and Maiese appear to pursue something like a singular enactive answer to the question “What am I?”, a unified enactive account of the human self as a whole. I argue, however, that any such search for a single, fixed “enactive” account of what we are is in tension with the radically constructivist stance toward knowledge that follows from taking seriously the enactive philosophy of Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991).

At the core of enactivism is the view of minded/living systems (“selves”) as autonomous self-organising systems that bring about and strive to maintain their own precarious identity through their sense-making activity (which includes cognitive and affective processes), that is, through their active bodily engagement with their world. Any form of sense-making, including any production of scientific knowledge, is thus conceived not as an attempt to access and represent a mind-independent world but always as originating from the normative perspective of an autonomous system concerned with its own maintenance. Knower and known are thus revealed to be indissoluble: to know is to have viable ways of acting and thinking within one’s world that are functional to achieve one’s goals. This radical constructivist stance on knowledge implies then that any scientific account, and thus also any account of the self, is never a static picture of the world assumed to stand on its own, but always only a model constructed by an observer as a tool to guide their thinking in a specific domain of discourse and inquiry.

Once the radically constructivist implications of enactivism are taken seriously – I argue – the body-social problem dissolves and the clash between Kyselo and Maiese on whether the self is socially embedded or constituted reveals itself as ultimately unproductive. The body-social problem arises only if we assume that there must be a single, coherent account of the self as a whole. What Kyselo and Maiese want to model is our “I”, but what we call our “I” in ordinary language is not something suited to be identified and discussed at only one level of description and inquiry. It encompasses a huge range of extremely different phenomena – a minimal self-

awareness, a sense of one's body as one's own, a sense of one's social identity, and so on – and it arises as a unity, as a single “I”, only in the space of language. When treated as competing global accounts of the human self “as a whole,” the “enactive” accounts of the human self offered by Kyselo and Maiese risk therefore fixing identity at a single level of description, thereby losing explanatory power by privileging certain dimensions – social or bodily – over certain others.

I conclude by defending the groundless, multilevel view of selfhood offered instead by Francisco Varela. On this view, consistent with enactivism's radical constructivist foundations, identity can be meaningfully attributed at multiple, overlapping scales – biological, affective, neural, interpersonal, political, etc. – without any one of these exhausting what we are. Indeed, identity at one level does not negate identity at another; rather, different explanatory contexts and needs legitimately call for the individuation of different systems as relevant. Bodily and social dimensions are thus not seen here as rival sources of individuation, and the two accounts of the self of Kyselo and Maiese can thus be seen not as conflicting but perfectly compatible, both viable ways of understanding ourselves in different contexts. Abandoning the search for a fixed, unified account of the human self thus ultimately allows enactivism to better accommodate the richness, variability, and plurality of our experiences of ourselves.