

Open Peer Commentaries

on Michael Kirchhoff and Daniel Hutto's "Never Mind the Gap"

On the Too Often Overlooked Radicality of Neurophenomenology

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> **Upshot** • We point out that the significance of the neurophenomenological approach to the "hard problem" of consciousness is underrated and misunderstood by the authors of the target article. In its original version, neurophenomenology implies nothing less than a change in our own being to dispel the mere sense that there is a problem to be theoretically solved or dissolved. Neurophenomenology thus turns out to be much more radical than the enactivist kind of dissolution promoted by the authors.

« 1 » This challenging target article holds a radical enactivist position that is perfectly consonant with constructivism. However, it systematically misconstrues the original approach to the "hard problem" of consciousness advocated by Francisco Varela under the name "neurophenomenology." It is then all too easy for the authors of the article to claim that they have taken a step forward with respect to neurophenomenology. In fact, the scale of radicality should be turned upside down. Neurophenomenology is by far more radical and advanced than this

brand of enactivism, provided its original Varelian version is properly understood.

« 2 » Indeed (as we will show below), the authors make claims about consciousness that unambiguously belong to objectivist *naturalism*, a class of doctrines of which physicalism is a restrictive case. But "naturalism" is precisely the archetypal opponent of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, which underpins the strong variety of neurophenomenology advocated by Varela. Such discrepancy seriously hinders the recognition of Varela's boldness in his approach to the "hard problem."

« 3 » Usually, naturalists barely recognize that their position is only one among several options, because they are embedded in a scientific culture for which the naturalistic option is a matter of course (see, e.g., Descola 2013). The authors of the target article are no exception to this rule. As a consequence, they do not appreciate the deep originality of Varela's approach to the "hard problem" of consciousness, that is:

- amplifying the concept of "naturalization" to avoid the standard objectifying prejudice of naturalism (Vörös 2014);
- confronting the problem of consciousness from a consistently phenomenological standpoint (by taking first-person experience as a *de facto* absolute starting point of *any* inquiry);
- replacing the project of finding a theoretical "solution" to the hard problem, or trying to "explain" the correlation between biological processes and consciousness, with a transformed *attitude*, thus dispelling the problem entirely and making the need for any "explanation" simply pointless.

This radical attitude is rooted in the phenomenological tradition, but Varela's advancement was to make it directly relevant to the world of scientific enquiry.

« 4 » Let us now develop the former points.

On the misunderstanding of Varela's position

« 5 » §6 confirms the above-mentioned misunderstanding by following uncritically the conclusions found in Timothy Bayne (2004). The authors here equate neurophenomenology with a variety of non-reductionism. However, in the introduction of Varela's celebrated paper of 1996, it is made clear that although neurophenomenology endorses a *critique* of reductionism, in the same way as do David Chalmers or John Searle, it adopts *no* alternative naturalistic metaphysical option, unlike (say) Chalmers. The latter's variety of naturalist metaphysics seeks a solution to the hard problem in

- positing a duality between the phenomenal and the physical "properties," and
- inquiring into the (alleged) law-like relations between the two series of "properties."

But neither of these two orientations is adopted by Varela's neurophenomenology.

« 6 » Varela did not look for an ontological "solution" to the hard problem (such as Chalmers' property dualism), for he considered that the very statement of this problem is a fundamental fallacy. Instead, Varela prescribed what he called a "remedy" for the feeling that there *exists* a problem to be confronted. This reference to a "remedy" is absolutely crucial to understanding Varela's position, but is nowhere commented on by the authors. The use of the word "remedy" in the subtitle of his original paper of 1996 about neurophenomenology clearly shows that Varela was looking (at the very least) for a "dissolution" of the hard problem, or something even more expeditious, rendering the quest for a "solution" obsolete. The word "remedy" echoes Wittgenstein's "treat-

ment” of philosophical “illnesses.” In philosophy, a treatment is a procedure, a shift in perspective, that reveals the incorrectness of the presuppositions giving rise to a perceived “problem” and invites one to bypass this problem entirely.

« 7 » Thus, Varela had already endorsed the authors’ claim that “the hard problem is not just hard: it is impossible” (§36), since he wanted to cure scholars of the belief that there is anything like a problem to be solved. But Varela’s remedy was much more radical than the dissolution offered by the authors. The authors arrive at a monistic (and naturalistic) *theory* of the phenomenal and the physical. They come close to a double-aspect theory (§41) and then adopt an identity theory (§§41f). It is in the name of this family of monistic theories that they reject the dualistic presupposition implicit in the very formulation of the hard problem, thereby dissolving it. By contrast, Francisco Varela explicitly dismissed any view of this kind (not only dualistic but *also* monistic), as well as, and crucially, any *temptation* to look for some “theoretical fix” that would solve the hard problem (Bitbol 2012). This strategy of engaging with a metaphysical problem from the standpoint of a non-metaphysical stance is perfectly allowed, and might even prove mandatory for addressing the “hard problem” of consciousness, in contradistinction with what the authors claim in a footnote to §14. Such process, codified and extensively practiced by Wittgenstein, is tantamount to performing a *reductio ad absurdum*: tentatively positing a premise (here the metaphysical formulation of the “hard problem”) for the sake of showing its basic incorrectness.

« 8 » Moreover, it is inaccurate in the context of Varela’s work to state (as the authors do in §6, by endorsing the position of some post-Varelian neurophenomenologists) that putting human life back into the mix just means “expanding neuroscience to include original phenomenological investigations of experience” (§4). Unlike most of his followers, Varela considered that the injunction to *put human life back* is to be taken at face value: the issue of consciousness must be addressed *entirely* from the standpoint of human lived experience, as Husserl’s phenomenology would have it. His slogan was “lived experience is where we start from and

where we all must link back to, like a guiding thread.” Accordingly, Varela did not adopt a “background of metaphysical assumptions” (§7), since he comprehended the fundamental error of any such assumption and instead ended up in putting metaphysics at rest within the phenomenological *stance* he had adopted. To recapitulate, Varela’s position cannot be rendered as either a dualist metaphysics, or a monist metaphysics, or any kind of theory, but as a non-dual and a-ontological *way of being*.

« 9 » The reason why Varela’s approach to the “hard problem” goes much farther than the dissolution advocated by the authors of the target article should be clear by now. Varela does not even share the assumption that increasing one’s understanding of an objectified nature is enough to address (let alone dissolve intellectually) the hard problem. He rather advocates an existential mutation, inspired by the phenomenological *epochè* promoted by Husserl, to dispel the sense that there is a problem to be *theoretically* solved or dissolved. As soon as the *epochè* is practiced, there is no such thing as two sets of “properties” (phenomenal and physical), and not even some transcendent monistic domain of which the phenomenal and the physical would be two aspects, but only *one immanent domain of lived experience* from which a set of intersubjectively common features are extracted and treated *as if* they belonged to some “physical” independent world.

On the reluctance to follow the neurophenomenological program up to its ultimate consequences

« 10 » Among the consequences of Varela’s existential mutation, descriptions of first-person experiences must be taken just as seriously as descriptions and scientific laws pertaining to public (“third-person”) phenomena. By contrast, the authors convey a widespread negative prejudice against “introspection” in §9. Like almost everyone else in the field, they base their negative statement on a cursory reference to Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson’s paper of 1977. Yet they should not ignore that there has been a recent revival of introspection-like methods, partly initiated by Varela’s neurophenomenological program (Depraz, Varela & Vermersch 2004). That we are

witnessing a crucial change in the field of introspection, with good reasons to regain confidence in its potential, is made very likely by an experiment showing that, under certain conditions, Nisbett and Wilson’s negative claim is no longer valid (Petitmen- gin et al. 2013). No criticism of introspection based on Nisbett and Wilson’s claim can nowadays avoid a thorough discussion of the latter paper.

On the issue of naturalism

« 11 » The misconstrual of neurophenomenology as a form of naturalism starts quite early in the target article. In §27, one reads:

“it is fair for Varela to insist on the ‘equal status’ of first- and third-personal data. [...] However [...] the proposal [...] implies the very metaphysical distinction between the phenomenal and the physical that fuels the hard problem.”

« 12 » Actually, Varela’s methodological distinction between first- and third-personal data is by no means tantamount to a metaphysical distinction between the phenomenal and the physical. Indeed, let us consider the following remark by Varela in his 1996 paper: “the usual opposition of first-person vs. third-person accounts is misleading. It makes us forget that so-called third-person, objective accounts are done by a community of concrete people [...]” According to Varela, there is no such thing as an intrinsically third-personal domain, and no such thing as a metaphysically distinct “physical” set of entities. In agreement with Husserl’s phenomenology, and as hinted above, the “so-called third-person, objective accounts” are construed by Varela as a byproduct of selecting particular regions of lived (first-personal) experience, for the sake of sharing them with “a community of concrete people” endowed with the same kind of experience. There is no metaphysics, here, but only a *practice* of construction of third-person knowledge out of a coordination of lived experiences, and a (phenomenological) *stance* of leaning on lived experience for any further elaboration. That “neurophenomenology’s main strategy was to address the metaphysical problem by offering an illuminating non-reductive explanation” (§28) is thus twice wrong:

- neurophenomenology is foreign to the project of theoretically *explaining* the origin of the phenomenal out of the physical, and
- neurophenomenology implies no meta-physical commitment to some sort of crypto-dualistic formulation of the hard problem.

« 13 » But, unlike Varela, the authors adhere to a metaphysical view that is less distinct from non-reductive physicalism than claimed. Let us comment on the following sentence:

“Phenomenal experience, on an REC view, just is a kind organismic activity. As such, it can be given a physical description. Nevertheless, physical descriptions neither adequately characterize nor capture everything that can apply to phenomenal consciousness.” (§39)

« 14 » The only difference between this position and non-reductive physicalism is to be found in the “identity” claim, as opposed to the allegedly aspect-dual or property-dualist presupposition of standard non-reductive physicalism (§41). Similarly, the only difference between the authors’ position and old-fashioned mind-brain identity theory, is that the sphere of the natural world that is “identified” with consciousness is expanded to the organism as a whole. As does every supporter of a strong variety of naturalism, the authors identify consciousness with a certain fraction of the *objectified natural world* (here, the living organism). But saying bluntly that the phenomenal *is* such and such a natural process amounts to closing one’s eyes to the very meaning of the word “phenomenal”: “phenomenal” is the adjective (in noun form) that applies to the *non-objective*, lived, experiential *manifestation*. Declaring that the phenomenal *is* some objective process of nature then neither solves nor dissolves the hard problem, but changes the meaning of one of the most crucial words that enters into its formulation.

Conclusion

« 15 » To sum up, the naturalistic, identity-theoretic, approach of the authors

- is a weak variety of dissolution of the hard problem when compared to Varela’s; and
- does not satisfactorily achieve the sought dissolution, because it leaves

on hold the “explanandum” of the hard problem (“something,” which is not even a “thing” but a condition for anything to appear), and instead relies on a mere semantic sleight of hand bearing on the word “phenomenal.”

By contrast, Varela’s phenomenological approach offers a radical and complete dismissal of the hard problem for it penetrates in the very existential attitude which makes this issue appear as a *problem*. Its “curative” strategy thus turns out to be a full success, for it leaves nothing out of its experiential account: neither the phenomenal as a whole, nor the physical construed as a system of intersubjectively ascertained structures of experience.

« 16 » The only weakness of Varela’s strategy is in fact our weakness: not everyone is ready to perform the existential mutation it requires; not everyone knows how to achieve the phenomenological *epochè*. To embrace Varela’s point sincerely and wholeheartedly requires deep personal commitment to the transformation of one’s conscious experience and its application to all life, including one’s scientific pursuits, which not many are willing to undertake.

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RECEIVED: 18 JANUARY 2016

ACCEPTED: 17 FEBRUARY 2016

Not to Avoid But Legitimize: Why the Gap Could Be Natural For the Enactive World

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> **Upshot** • I show that the gap problem is of no threat to the enactivist approach; moreover, if the enactivism model is thoroughly thought over through extending ontology, it may turn out that the gap should be naturally built in the wholeness of the world at the level of its self-cognition.

« 1 » The target article by Michael Kirchhoff and Daniel Hutto captures very precisely the changes that have to be made in the modern science about consciousness, if we want to break the epistemological deadlock or stop spinning our wheels. Today, these changes are being discussed more and more often. We are talking here about the global objective of overcoming the subject and object dichotomy as well as the dualistic vocabulary of philosophy and science.

« 2 » In the meantime, the authors tend to take a cautious approach. They focus on highlighting key points rather than on revolutionary reforms – we should leave the existing state of things as it is, but we should formulate the right attitude to it and learn to use it properly. In some way, the right attitude implies avoiding the notorious gap between the mental and physical worlds, the gap that lies at the heart of the well-known hard problem of consciousness. Scientists should keep studying consciousness, sticking to “how” questions, and stop fretting over the inefficiency of “what” questions. After all, the situation with consciousness is hardly more pitiful than the situation typical of most (if not all) of the problems in science, which can be compared with a black box. We can learn a lot about every aspect of the behavior of the box contents without looking into the box.

« 3 » This solution may be quite satisfactory for applied sciences, which gener-