

From Radical Enactivism to Folk Philosophy

Daniel D. Hutto investigates what and how we think

Disagreement about what and how we think is as old as the philosophical hills. Such disagreement boils down to disagreement about the source and nature of ideas and how they influence us. In recent times, nowhere have such disagreements been so pronounced than in the on-going debates between cognitivist and radical enactivist accounts of mind.

At their heart, cognitivist conceptions of mind promote a purer, more idealised vision of minds and their machinery by emphasising that cognition is, in line with a long tradition, representational and computational in character. Radical enactivists, by contrast in tune with equally venerable traditions, conceive of mind and cognition as having, at root, messier, world-involving organic and dynamically interactive characters. By enactivist lights, minds are extensively and constitutively connected to their surrounding environments rather than merely embedded within them.

Taking sides in other longstanding disagreements about our nature, radical enactivists emphasise the ways in which we are fundamentally creatures of habit. They hold that our habits of thought say more about us than our quite specialised, scaffolded and late-emerging abilities to engage in bouts of pure – or, better, as pure as we can make

them – contentful forms of propositional thought and reasoning. Accordingly, capacities for calculating, computing and logical reasoning are not automatic birthrights of all minds. Rather they are hard-won and carefully honed abilities that depend on the immersion in and mastery of very particular kinds of patterned practices – practices that have been cultivated and emphasised in certain traditions around the world.

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But it is not just capacities for thinking that radical enactivism views as socio-cultural products. It is also not just that certain ways of thinking constitutively depend upon the existence of certain cultural practices – the same goes for what we think. In short, to adopt a radically enactivist account of mind is to take a down to earth view of whatever contents minds may come to have. It asks us to look for the contents of our minds in

the world around us – in art and artefacts we produce and in the institutions we establish. For, on the one hand, radical enactivism rejects the idea of contents and concepts as ideal and wholly objective denizens of some third realm that exists beyond us. Yet, on the other hand, it also surrenders the idea that contents and concepts are somehow denizens of inner realms that exist inside us.

A great deal of ink has been spilt trying to establish which, if either, of the aforementioned competing visions of mind – the cognitivist or the enactivist – is better justified. Which will ultimately carry the day in the long run? Turning aside from those questions, in this short piece I propose exploring a more Jamesian one: What is the upshot for philosophy if we take an enactivist conception of mind very seriously?

At the start of this new century, philosophy is undergoing – as ever – something of an identity crisis. This is surely true of analytic philosophy. Its longstanding commitment to traditional forms of conceptual analysis is being actively challenged by new thinking that has arisen along with advent of experimental philosophy, conceptual engineering, and global philosophy.

These important new philosophical developments take on a particular look and are differently motivated if one adopts enactivist as opposed to cognitivist conceptions of mind. In other words, enactivist conceptions about what and how we think have implications for how we understand the point, purpose and methods of philosophy.

Adopting a radical enactive view of the extensive character of conceptual content leads to the view that elucidating concepts is, as Hans-Johan Glock puts it, a matter of articulating “an understanding obtained

as part of language acquisition and of enculturation, that is, of the immersion into a shared linguistic practice”. Such work is “ultimately an attempt to articulate participatory knowledge of a shared language”.

With this in mind, Glock reminds us that philosophy focuses on “concepts that we use outside philosophy, in everyday life, science, or other specialized domains”. For these reasons, attending to our use of concepts, of necessity, requires that we attend to everyday practices that give those concepts life. And, in this regard, it is worth joining Paul Horwich in noting that, “for the most part these practices evolved not for the sake of helping us to understand the world, but to serve a variety of more humdrum practical purposes and to serve them in a way that conduces to the complex contingencies of our nature, our culture and our environment”.

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Yet even though many of our concepts and practices arose for everyday purposes that were not philosophical per se, they can and do often embed and help to perpetuate folk philosophies. Folk philosophies are sedimented into our ways of doing things and the socio-cultural products that make up our local, material environments. They are, for example, built-into the stories and myths, the art and architecture, the prose



and poetry, the science and religion of the various peoples. They, for example, are embedded just as much in the sacred stories of indigenous communities as they are in Roman and Greek myths.

Or to take another example owed to Julian Baggini. Buddhist thought – expressed through its mantras -- is literally bound with artefacts such as prayer wheels and how they are used. Commenting on the embedding of this folk philosophy in such practices he writes:

“Everything that happens here reflects a particular way of understanding the fundamental nature of the structure of reality —a metaphysics ... This metaphysical picture is strange and exotic for those outside the tradition, but for those within, it is often little more than a common-sense assumption about how the world works.”

The radically enactive view of extensive minds agrees with Bernard Williams’ thought, that “the content of our concepts is a contingent historical phenomenon. To hold that the content of our thoughts and beliefs – what we might possibly think in the here and now – does not stand free from a longer history suffices to encourage the idea that acquaintance with the history of practices and ideas is necessary and non-negotiable in our philosophical pursuits. Inevitably, past notions, and deeply ingrained ways of thinking hold sway over us, whether we know it or recognise it or not.

These observations serve to remind us that we cannot so much as articulate or understand what we currently believe without coming to terms with the history of ideas, practices and institutions that inform our thinking. It is because our current ways of thinking are constituted in large part by shared ways of thinking that have a partic-

ular history that it is necessary that serious philosophical investigations need to take stock of local folk philosophies. It is because what and how we think has a contingent character informed by our patterned practices that, to be truly enlightening, self-reflective philosophical work is best conducted by deeply delving in to traditions of thought and doing so in a wide-ranging manner.

When doing philosophy there is yet another reason for unearthing and attending to our folk philosophical thinking that is embedded in our customs, practices and institutions. Exposing the deeply rooted ways that we tend to think is necessary if we are to liberate and clarify our beliefs about important topics.

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As Wittgenstein taught us, doing philosophy often requires breaking free from certain compelling but distorting pictures or ways of thinking about various subject matters – ways of thinking that irresistibly attract us and “bewitch our intelligence”. The grip such philosophical pictures has on us, as John Hyman puts it, “is not the grip of a tremendous hypothesis, like the big bang, but more like the grip of an entrancing metaphor or myth; and their influence ... is as permanent as the language in which they are lodged”.

The power of such pictures can be so complete that the ways of thinking they promote are not taken to be merely one possible way of thinking about the topic in question, but as the *only possible* way of doing so. Breaking free of pictures that distort, and the picture-driven theorising they inspire, requires recognising that the picture is not a source of special insight into a given subject matter but may be a constraining and distracting imposition on our thinking.

It is here that we can see the importance of becoming acquainted with the folk philosophies immanent in our unexamined trends of thought – the ambient folk philosophies that are implicit in our established practices, customs and institutions. For these practices are a main source of encumbering philosophical pictures that operate on and constrain our thinking without our noticing or being aware of their influence.

Investigating and coming to terms with the character of our folk philosophical thinking can be a powerful means of better understanding how philosophical pictures took root in the past. Such investigations have the power, potentially, of loosening the sway such pictures have over our thinking now.

Consider the influential assumption that mental processes are defined as operations over inner mental objects of some sort. This idea is very much alive and kicking – it is a cornerstone assumption constituting a major foundation in today’s sciences of the mind. This assumption of contemporary Western scientific psychology has a history that can be traced to long tradition of thinking that embeds a folk philosophy – one that it is committed to a picture according to which concepts are mental objects.

What is the source of this assumption? Eugen Fischer argues that the concepts of “mind” and “idea” as we use them in the West came into play along with rise of British Empiricism, during the early modern period – from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century. It was at that point, Fisher argues, that “a new concept of mind” as a kind of container of mental happenings displaced the previously dominant Aristotelian conception of mind.

These familiar framework assumptions about the nature of minds and ideas came to be treated as obviously true by philosophers at the time – and yet, as Fischer emphasizes, they are clearly “not part of common sense”. Instead, they are, “distinctively philosophical, and at the time, fresh intuitions ... shared, without explicit argument, by many early modern thinkers”.

Though they are not part of common sense, such pictures are firmly rooted in everyday thought. They are part and parcel of a local folk philosophy – one that can be brought into the light, investigated, examined and questioned.

How might we explain our general picture-driven tendencies and habits of thought? If we want to understand why it is, in general, that we are susceptible to philosophical pictures, we can look, as Fischer recommends, to psychology and cognitive science to understand how analogies, metaphors and pictures influence us, just as we do when trying to understand other cognitive biases. Or, if we wish to know exactly how and under what conditions certain populations tend towards such styles of folk philosophical thinking, we can turn to experimental philosophy to investigate such matters experimentally and collect relevant

descriptive data.

Yet those sorts of empirical approaches only take us so far. To understand folk philosophies and put them under critical scrutiny requires something more – it requires distinctively philosophical work: reflective work of a kind that reveals why any adequate philosophical investigation of folk philosophy will have an inescapable historical character.

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As the example of the source of entrenched views about the nature of concepts in early modern philosophy reveals, a powerful way to question entrenched philosophical assumptions is to attend to how certain ways of thinking originally took hold in the history of ideas and to review how that particular history unfolded, at least in local traditions and contexts. As Bernard Williams put it, this is a minimal requirement “if we are to know what reflective attitude to take to our own conceptions”. This is a salient reminder that “in seeking to understand ourselves — we need concepts and explanations which are rooted in our more local practices, our culture, and our history, and these cannot be replaced by concepts which we might share with very different investigators of the world”.

What we think and how we tend to think – the very content of our thoughts and our habits of mind – depend on the influential

creations of the shared socio-cultural world that we collectively crafted. If this is so, then to understand the way we tend to think about important topics, Williams argues, leads us to inquire why such thinking takes “certain forms here rather than others, and one can only do that with the help of history”.

Underlining this point, Williams recognises that certain of the most cherished

concepts and ways of thinking in the Western tradition are “a manifestly contingent cultural development; they would not have evolved at all if Western history had not taken a certain course”. Hence, he goes on to tell us that, “the reflective understanding of our ideas and motivations, which I take to be by general agreement a philosophical aim, is going to involve historical understanding. Here history helps philosophical



understanding, or is part of it”.

If we follow Williams’s line of thinking, it turns out that historical investigations are indispensable for certain philosophical projects. As Richard Moran puts it, the legacy of Williams is to underscore “an importance for history in the self-understanding of the practice of philosophy”. The take-away lesson is that philosophy is “in continual confrontation with its history, as a resource for comprehension and critique”.

Taking all of the above into account, Moran argues that it would be hard to deny that studying folk philosophies historically provides a valuable service for us in that it helps to release us from “the constraints on philosophical imagination that come with a certain professionalization of the subject”. Certainly, we must always remind ourselves that when reflecting on important philosophical topics, “we are not”, as Williams put it, “unencumbered intelligences selecting in principle among all possible outlooks”.

Yet there are arguments afoot that ought to make us wary of assuming that when doing philosophy seriously it is enough to become acquainted with only our own local tradition of thought, however rich it may be. Indeed, it is this general animating idea that motivates the movement of global or world philosophy. In pressing for a more cross-cultural style of philosophy K. J. Struhl sums up a positive line of reasoning in favour of going global when doing philosophy.

“[S]elf-reflexivity requires that any given philosophical investigation must be examined from an alternative vantage point. Since the assumptions which inform the

inquiry are deeply imbedded [sic] within a given culture, immanent critique is insufficient. The only way to step outside the boundaries of these cultural presuppositions is to reflect on the given problem from the vantage point of another culture’s philosophical tradition.”

It may be thought that Struhl goes too far in claiming that the only way to radically challenge our deeply entrenched assumptions is to bring diverse traditions of thought into dialogue with one another when reflecting on important topics. Nevertheless, it would be hard to deny that exploring how familiar topics are treated from the vantage of alternative folk philosophies, if done well, is a powerful way to imaginatively explore and evaluate relevant possibilities. By expanding our thinking in such ways we can help to loosen the grip of stultifying parochial philosophical pictures fostered by the folk philosophies that lie in wait for us, unnoticed, in our home traditions of thought.

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We can fruitfully put these two lines of thought together and, along with Robert Bernasconi, agree that the best way philosophers – who always come with their own unexamined folk philosophical baggage – can benefit from exploring diverse perspec-

tives is “by immersing themselves in other traditions to the best of their ability while not losing sight of their own tradition”.

In the end, if we take a radically enactive view of the extensive nature of minds seriously, we are led to assume that what and how we think is constituted by aspects of our shared world in ways that we are not always readily aware. This is true not just of folk psychology, folk biology or folk physics. Folk philosophies, in general, reside all around us. They are embedded and preserved in our socio-cultural artefacts and practices. If this is so, it becomes clear why the best way to conduct serious philosophical investigations into the topics we care about most requires not only exploring one’s home folk philosophical tradition in its historical depth but also bringing it into dialogue with diverse traditions of thought.

Further Reading

- Julian Baggini, *How the World Thinks: A Global History of Philosophy*. London: Granta.
- David Cooper, *World Philosophies: A Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Eigen Fischer, *Philosophical Delusion and its Therapy: Outline of a Philosophical Revolution*. London, Routledge.
- D. D. Hutto, *Folk Psychological Narratives. The Sociocultural Basis of Understanding Reasons*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- D. D. Hutto and E. Myin, *Radicalizing Enactivism: Basic Minds without Content*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- D. D. Hutto and E. Myin, *Evolving Enactivism: Basic Minds Meet Content*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

- Richard Moran, *The Philosophical Imagination: Selected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bernard Williams, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*. Princeton University Press.
- Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

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