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TOWARDS A DEEPLY EMBODIED ENACTIVISM

Giovanni Pennisi

We start by discussing a paper written by Shaun Gallagher in which he assesses the epistemological validity of enactivism by analyzing some researches on human performativity. Our thesis is that such operation, in order to be successful, should be enriched by the contributions coming from phenomenological psychopathology; more specifically, we claim that the alterations in the bodily roots of self that occur in schizophrenia should be taken as a paradigm for studying the role of the body in the interplay between the individual and the environment. Finally, we will account for our conviction that performativity and non-performativity might be the pillars of a new form of enactivism.

Keywords: Enactivism, Performance, Bodily Self-Awareness, Disembodiment, Schizophrenia.

I. INTRODUCTION

In his paper *Mindfulness and mindlessness in performance* Gallagher tries to defend enactivism against the accusation of being a form of «dressed-up behaviorism» (Shapiro 2011; 2014), which is based upon the observation that enactivism too often described the interaction between sensorimotor systems and environment as the only event that matters in the development of human cognition. Although it is undeniable that some enactivists focused their attention primarily on the role played by the action/perception cycle in the «enactment» of our consciousness (i.e. O'Regan, Noë 2001; Noë 2004), it is just as true that many academics feel the urge to make enactivism «even more embodied» (Gallagher, Bower 2014), and consider the latter as the ideal bridge between the *embodied* and the *embedded* approaches to cognition (Thompson 2005).

According to Gallagher, one of the possible ways to make enactivism more embodied is to take into account the literature on intersubjectivity (Gallagher 2017, §8). Intersubjectivity, in fact, is the paradigmatic example of the relationship between environmental inputs

and bodily structures: as we grow, we become increasingly more able in reading others' expressions and in grasping the meaning of their actions thanks to both our Mirror Neurons System – which is nowadays considered as the neurophysiological basis for social cognition (Gallese *et al.* 2004; Gallese 2009) – and our early «embeddedness» in a shared world where, through the interaction with caregivers and conspecifics, we practise our ability to pre-reflexively catch social affordances (Hutto 2007; Gallagher, Hutto 2008).

The interdependence among body, environment and mental functions is thus proven by the fact that the more we exercise our social skills, the more we embody them, letting them become part of those processes that, despite being conscious, do not need any mental inference nor thematization. What we just said about social skills, however, applies also to practical ones. In the paper we are discussing, Gallagher tries to demonstrate that the missing interference by a conceptual form of awareness does not correspond to a total lack of mindfulness; in order to do that, he refers to some mechanisms that trigger when experts perform the tasks at which they excel. Such mechanisms are: «selective target control, an implicit sense of rightly configured body and a pre-reflective sense of body-as-subject» (Gallagher 2018, 12).

What we want to do in this paper is to show what happens to such mechanisms when we enter what we will call «the realm of non-performative brain-body systems», that is schizophrenia. We believe that an operation like that might provide a solid foundation to the strongly embodied enactivism embraced by Gallagher, considering that no approach has ever investigated the implications underpinning the disruption of the interplay among mind, body and environment better than psychopathology – and, more specifically, phenomenological psychopathology – did.

2. ENACTIVISM AND PERFORMANCE

For both the approaches we have mentioned above – the enactive orientation that is interested in investigating the role played by perception in cognition and the deeply embodied one –, studies on performance served as a reference for testing the hypotheses on the interaction among body, mind and environment. In his famous book *Out of*

our heads (2009), for example, Alva Noë discussed some experiments (Grays 2004; Milton *et al.* 2007) conducted on expert and amateur performers, summing up the results as follows: as far as novices are concerned, there is a direct proportionality between the degree of focused attention they pay to the task and the efficiency of their performance; on the opposite, the relationship between experts' attention and performance efficiency is inversely proportional (Noë 2009, 99-100).

The idea that, once the learning process of a specific ability is completed, the quality of the performance depends upon our predisposition to remain within the lowest levels of conscious processing of the inputs is pivotal for enactivism. In the same way we become expert at immediately catching the emotional content intrinsic to others' facial expressions in a way that doesn't require any kind of inference about their mental states (for arguments against the ToM based theories, see Gallese 2007), an amateur turns into a skillful dancer when he manages to embody the choreography, that is to say he doesn't need to thematically focus on every single step of it. We are talking about what Merleau-Ponty called «body schema» (Merleau-Ponty 1962) and what Gallagher, many years later, defined «bodily/performative self-awareness» (Gallagher & Zahavi 2005; Gallagher 2005): a form of self-consciousness that we develop since the early stages of life and that doesn't rely on our ability to think about the way we need to move our body in order to reach a specific goal, but rather «is tied to our embodied capabilities for movement and action» (*ibid.*, 74).

Studying performance, thus, means trying to understand how movement and action synchronize with environmental contingencies – the baseball that comes towards the batter, the limited space of the stage where the dancer performs, the music played by the guitarist's bandmates – and it's a small-scale example of what enactivism is all about: showing that «cognition is not the representation of a pregiven world by a pregiven mind but is rather the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs» (Varela *et al.* 1992, 9). It's only through our *practical* – that is to say, both *pragmatic* and *practiced* – experience of «being in the world» that we learn to master our cognitive and social abilities. Such skills sharpening process, however, is always conditional upon the development of a bodily/performative self-awareness, that is our tacit knowledge of what we can and cannot do with our body.

To show how our bodily self-awareness works and how it attunes to the environment, Gallagher mentions the examples made by some academics (Sutton *et al.* 2011; Legrand 2007) about the performances of expert cricket players and dancers: «a cricket player, with less than half a second to execute hitting a hard fast traveling at 140 km/h, draws not only on smoothly-practiced batting, but also on context and conditions relevant to the game, in order to hit a shot with extraordinary precision through a slim gap in the field» (Gallagher 2018, 8). In a similar way, the dancer's own body «is experienced nonthematically, prereflectively and as an aspect of the acting subject – as in everyday walking» (*ibid.*, 9). According to Gallagher, thus, some of the elements that make up our body schema are the selective target control, a softly conscious monitoring of the configurations of our body and an implicit sense of the body-as-subject (*ibid.*, 12); not only we agree with Gallagher, but we think that the importance of such conscious processes is proven by their disruption in schizophrenia. This is the topic we are going to address in the next paragraph.

3. SCHIZOPHRENIA AS THE REALM OF ANTI-PERFORMATIVITY

Whereas enactivism focuses on how human cognition and consciousness are brought forth by the dynamical interaction between the environment and the individual's mind-body system, phenomenological psychopathology deals with the very opposite: all the (pathological) cases in which the harmonious flow that binds man with surroundings breaks off. There is no doubt that, among all mental illness, schizophrenia is the one that causes the most profound alterations in the structures that normally provide a foundation for a stable human existence (Sass 1992).

Over the years, philosophers and psychiatrists wondered about the real nature of schizophrenia symptoms and investigated on the reasons underlying the fracture that the latter produce on the relationship between the patients and the outside world. Wolfgang Blankenburg, for example, focused on the patients' feelings of isolation and detachment from others generated by what he called «loss of natural self-evidence» (Blankenburg 1971), that is the inability of schizophrenics to automatically and pre-reflexively grasp the meaning of people's ac-

tions. Such phenomenon is correlated to both what Minkowski defined «morbid rationalism» (Minkowski 1927), which is the patient's tendency to interpret others' acts as they are driven by merely logical rules, and what has been lately called «hyperreflexivity» (Sass 1992; Sass, Parnas 2003): a form of exaggerated self-awareness that brings patients to overthink about events that would be normally processed by the lowest levels of consciousness.

Despite attaching a crucial importance to such phenomena, Thomas Fuchs, who is one of the most influential phenomenological psychiatrists of our time, claims that the dissolution that they produce is «primarily rooted in the loss of tacit self-awareness [...], the result of the fragmentation of bodily intentionality itself» (Fuchs 2005, 101). According to Fuchs, thus, the core symptom of schizophrenia is the patient's «disembodiment» (*ibid.*; Fuchs, Schlimme 2009; Stanghellini 2004), the breakdown of all the automatisms that depend on the correct functioning of body-schema and that allow people to act in a performative way. As the disease progresses, the process of dis-automation starts to involve every single one of those aspects that usually characterizes our non-problematic experience of the world: «instead of simply dressing, driving, walking etc., they [the patients] have to prepare and produce each single action deliberately, in a way that could be called a «Cartesian» action of the mind on the body» (Fuchs, Röhricht 2017).

We believe that schizophrenics' progressive loss of contact with the enactive foundations of the existence – familiarity of everyday situations, pre-reflexive reading of others' mind, bodily attunement to contextual requests – might be read as the disruption of the mechanisms that underlie the experts' performance efficiency (§2):

Selective target control: in a paper written in 1961 by Andrew McGhie and James Chapman, the authors addressed the issue of disorders of attention and perception in schizophrenia. What they found out is that, in the early stages of the disease, patients struggle to keep their attention focused on just one element of the scene. According to one of the patients' words, trying to concentrate is like «trying to do two or three different things at the one time» (McGhie, Chapman 1961, 104). Moreover, some of the patients who were interviewed by the authors talked about a desynchronization between visual and auditory stimuli, whilst some other reported they could never avoid getting distracted from what they were doing or thinking about (see

also Oltmanns 1978). In other words, with the onset of the pathology, schizophrenics' attention is directed «not by the individual's volition but by the diffuse pattern of stimuli existing in the total environment situation» (*ibid.*, 105).

Softly conscious monitoring of bodily configurations: the way in which our body usually withdraws in a tacit dimension over our everyday experience might be described in terms of «self-transparency» (Fuchs 2005) or «mediated immediacy» (Plessner 1981). In schizophrenia, however, «the tacit mediating role of the body becomes explicit and felt, thereby changing the whole nature of experiencing» (De Haan, Fuchs 2010). Patients often exercise a thematic control on their body that goes from repetitively touching their own body parts – as if they try to verify if their body still «belongs» to them – to the fragmentation of every goal-related movement in many sub-movements, like in the following example: «If I do something like going for a drink of water, I've to go over each detail – find cup, walk over, turn tap, fill cup, turn tap off, drink it» (Chapman 1966, 239). Schizophrenics' inability to get in the flow of the action is what makes them the paradigmatic example of what we may call *non-performative brain-body systems*.

Implicit sense of body-as-subject: our bodily self-awareness provides us with the opaque sensation of being a unity of body and mind. We usually do not think to «have» a body, but rather we «are» a body. This fundamental distinction reflects the one that Husserl made between *Leib* and *Körper* (Husserl 1931): whereas with the first term we refer to our *lived* body, that is the body that gives us an immediate and non-problematic access to the world thanks to the implicit knowledge of our body-schema's possible configurations, with the second one we refer to the body *as an object*. *Körper* is everything that has to do with the physical properties of the body: weight, height, anatomy of the structures etc. In schizophrenia, patients stop to live their body as they are one with it (body-as-subject) and soon start to perceive it not only as an object «like a machine or a robot» (Fuchs 2005, 102), but often as a foreign matter. Many subjects report to feel detached from their body, as if they became witnesses of their own body performing; such feeling is vividly captured by the words of two patients of Fuchs:

Patient 1: «I feel as if I am sitting on some distant planet and there is somehow a camera in my head and those images are sent there. As if I am completely far away from here, where I am sitting right now» (De Haan, Fuchs 2010, 329).

Patient 2: «For me it was as if my eyes were cameras, and my brain would still be in my body, but somehow as if my head were enormous, the size of a universe, and I was in the far back and the cameras were at the very front. So extremely far away from the cameras» (*ibid.*, 329-330).

Inability to concentrate on the focal elements of the perceptual field; heavy bodily sensations; fragmentation of the action; objectification of the body, with subsequent alienation from the latter; disembodiment: these are just some of the most common symptoms in schizophrenia. What makes the reflections upon them useful for the purpose of this paper is the fact that they shed light on the role played by the body on the experience from both a performative and an enactive point of view. The relationship among performativity, enactivism and psychopathology is going to be discussed in the Conclusion.

4. CONCLUSION

To claim that we need to develop a strongly embodied enactivism means embracing an idea of research on the bodily roots of the interaction between man and environment that looks beyond the mere role of perception. In the case of schizophrenia we saw that the disorders of perception are just one of the many symptoms; moreover, we saw that such abnormalities occur in the prodromal stages of the syndrome. Disturbances in attention and perception precede and are associated with alterations that impair the deepest structures of human consciousness, namely those which govern one's relationship with his own body and that enable to act in an ecological and efficiently performative way. We believe that putting together studies on performance with the research on psychopathologies might provide us with a clear picture of what is the role of the body in both easing and hindering our embeddedness in world: ultimately, this is what enactivism always aimed at.

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