Embodiment, Knowledge-Generation and Disciplinary Identity

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> Upshot • I welcome the perspective presented in Martiny’s target article. In this commentary I push for clarity on three matters: (a) The concept of embodiment; (b) The status of the type of knowledge generated in the phenomenological interview; and (c) The notion of openness in relation to interdisciplinarity and the disciplinary identity of the cognitive sciences.

Embodiment

1 = The first issue I wish to address in my commentary on the target article pertains to the concept of embodiment, and the work we expect this to do for us in specifying domains of research and appropriate methodologies. The notion of embodiment is central to Kristian Martiny’s argument insofar as he situates his call for a more open cognitive science through an appropriation of Francisco Varela’s active notion of ‘embodying cognition’ (§5). According to Martiny, this amounts to a pragmatic claim that we should understand cognition through what has become known as the E-approach in recent years (cognition as embodied, embedded, extended and enacted).

2 = From the onset, I should make it clear that I have no substantial disagreement with this perspective, nor with Martiny’s ambition of a radicalisation hereof. Quite on the contrary, I fully endorse an embodied perspective on cognition. However, as I will argue, a consistent appropriation of such a perspective has the unfortunate consequence of making the term embodiment tricky, at the very least.

3 = The problem is the tendency in the cognitive sciences to speak as if embodiment is something that starts from the neck and down. This, arguably Cartesian, framing is reflected in the very terms embodiment and incorporation, which both allude to the idea that there is something that is en-bodied or in-corporated; as if the mind were something external to the body – something that may or may not be embodied (Waldenfels 2000).

4 = From a phenomenological point of view, this tendency troubles me. I can point to no experience that, when thought through consistently, is not grounded in bodily existence, and I can therefore fully commit to Friedrich Nietzsche when he tells us: “Body am I entirely, and nothing else; and soul is only a word for something [ein Etwas] about the body” (Nietzsche 1976: 146).

5 = I do not expect Martiny to have any significant objections to this claim. In fact, I suspect such intuitions to be part of his motivation for endorsing a radicalisation of embodiment. So, what is the problem, one might ask?

6 = The problem is that if we consistently commit to this idea, we must inevitably face the issue that the term embodiment is too generic to designate its own specific cognitive research domain. If all cognitions are ultimately expressions of, and rooted in, the structures of our bodily existence, what do we then add when we speak of embodying cognition? The term body is, in this respect, a “word in excess,” as Jean-Luc Nancy points out (Nancy 2008: 21). Arguably, this also goes for the notion of radicalisation: if human existence is fundamentally bodily, how does it make sense to grade cognitions on a scale as more or less embodied? Surely, the aspeuctual qualities of body-as-object (Körper) or body-as-subject (Leib) might announce themselves to varying degrees in different experiences – changing the mode of self-manifestation of the body (Køster 2016, 2017) – but that does not make any of the experiences more or less en-bodied.

7 = In response to this line of argument, one might object that while it may be correct to state this, it only makes sense within a historical vacuum that disregards the particular development that has defined the cognitive sciences since the second half of the 20th century – with its focus on symbol manipulation, computation, etc. This, of course, a valid point, one that not only pertains to the way research has been done (confined and controlled experiments), but also to the particular conceptual and theoretical frameworks employed.

8 = However, I will maintain that we are confounding the issue if we continue to speak of embodiment as something that only starts from the neck and down. Strictly speaking, experiments in the laboratory are no less bodily than the kind of phenomenological interview Martiny himself is a proponent of, and the particular human mode for symbol manipulation should be seen as anchored in a capacity of the human body. The human body is a complex entity susceptible to various modes of inscription and capable of various modes of expression, mediating its constitutive entanglement with the world.

9 = Rather than perpetuating the segregation of cognitions into embodied and disembodied kinds, I wonder if the time might not be ripe for simply stating our bodily existence as a matter of fact, and from there systematically inquiring how we might best let the various and complex dimensions of this phenomenon come to full expression through our research methodologies? From this perspective, Martiny’s phenomenological interview is not more embodied; rather, it is more situated, more interactive, it brings out more constituents, more context – with all the advantages and pitfalls that this may entail.

10 = I am aware that this way of addressing the matter breaks with established orthodoxy, and may challenge research identities. Personally, however, I have experienced the confusion that the notion of embodiment produces – particularly in interdisciplinary contexts – and I fear that the continued talk of embodiment, and the identification of embodiment with the E-approach (which problematically includes embodiment as a constituent), will produce more problems than clarification. What we should focus on is how we design the most adequate research methodologies to address our bodily existence in its full and rich complexity. This clearly involves, inter alia, notions such as being embedded, extended and enacted.

The phenomenological interview

11 = In his plea for open and more situated research methodologies, Martiny takes up the idea of working with experience through a second-person perspective and promotes the idea of the phenomenological interview. This is an important move, one I am currently occupied with, and one phenomenology is terribly in need of as a result of its increasing ambitions to abandon the
strictly philosophical/transcendental focus and to rather engage with concrete empirical phenomena such as, e.g., psychopathology, where the phenomenologist cannot, as such, be expected to rely on first-person access.

« 12 » However, it is unclear to me exactly what kind of knowledge it is Martiny envisions will be generated through his conception of the interviews. Following Varela, Martiny situates his phenomenological interview within the E-approach to cognition, and makes it clear that we should not understand the explored experiences as instances of inner representations, as if they were objects to which we could retroactively return (§41). Rather, we are told that the generated knowledge is something the experiencing subject pragmatically enacts (ibid), and that knowledge is something the experiencing subject pragmatically enacts (ibid), and that should therefore talk about the generated knowledge “at a methodological (en) active level rather than at a theoretical level” (§42). This, in turn, is taken to imply that “the success, efficacy and functionality of the research depends on how the conducted method adapts to the situation” (ibid).

« 13 » Although I am highly enticed by the prospects of such a perspective on knowledge as enactive and emerging in the situation, I must admit that I feel a bit disoriented as to what this might actually look like or even mean? What would an example of such knowledge production look like, when resulting from a phenomenological interview? And, just as importantly, if it is in fact radically situated and enacted in a pragmatic context, how does it generalise to become relevant outside of the particular enacted context from which it achieves its meaning?

« 14 » My disorientation increases when I, in a subsequent paragraph, am told that in the phenomenological interview, we are not interested in the particular “here and now” aspects of the interviewees’ first-person experiences, but that the aim of the interview is to disclose “invariant phenomenological structures” (§50). These appear to me as two diverging ambitions: how does the phenomenological interview simultaneously succeed in focussing on enacted experiences within a situated methodology, and at the same time manage to draw out something as conclusive as invariant phenomenological structures?

« 15 » Although we certainly need more clarity as to what characterises the kind of pragmatic and enacted knowledge that Martiny emphasises, I believe, as I will point out below, that an equally pertinent issue relates to how we approach the phenomenological notion of invariant structures when moving phenomenology into second-person methodologies.

« 16 » The problem is that although such prominent contemporary phenomenologists as Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi (2012) insist on the notion of structural invariance as indispensable to phenomenology, there are very few such structures that are considered indisputably invariant. Therefore, it is worthwhile considering in what ways this notion should be retained when moving phenomenology into the more “messy” empirical setting, or if it should rather be seen as a relic of the transcendental/philosophical aspirations of Husserlian phenomenology?

« 17 » Personally, I do think there are important roles for the notion of invariant structures to play in guiding phenomenologically oriented interviews, in so far as these are aimed at exploring pre-reflective dimensions of experience. The reason for this is – as recognised in both the phenomenological tradition as such and the contemporary micro-phennomenological framework of, inter alia, Claire Petitmengin (2006) – that pre-reflective layers of experience do not offer themselves easily to reflection or verbalisation. It may therefore be necessary to guide the interviewee’s attention towards such structures of experience, in order to assist her in an elaboration on how they concretely manifest in her experiential reality. However, it is not clear to me what would make the reverse (and stronger) claim plausible, that we can arrive at invariant experiential structures through a phenomenological interview? In this respect, it is perhaps illustrative of the problem that the example Martiny points to is the “embodied nature of cognition” itself (§50). Surely, second-person methodologies may illustrate the ontogenetic variants of how cognition concretely embodies, but is it also the right medium for arguing that embodiment is in fact an invariant structure?

Openness and disciplinary identity

« 18 » The last issue I wish to address is how the proposed opening of the cognitive sciences might relate to interdisciplinarity, and if there potentially is an issue of compromising the disciplinary identity of the cognitive sciences.

« 19 » From the onset, it should be recognised that cognitive science is, of course, a highly interdisciplinary enterprise ranging across such diverse disciplines as neuroscience and anthropology. It should also be recognised that the kind of opening of the methodologies that Martiny is proposing is not necessarily new to cognitive psychology. One could, for example, point to the field of memory studies, where ideas of bringing the study of memory outside the lab date back to at least Ulrich Neisser’s Memory Observed (Neisser 1982) – though it was also standard in psychology as such before WWII.

« 20 » Despite this type of precedence, I wonder if there are some features of the discipline of cognitive science that still define it in opposition to other disciplines, such as a focus on inner representations, experimental setups and a somewhat mechanistic point of view on human cognition? All of these aspects are challenged in Martiny’s perspective, and it makes me wonder if his research perspective might not resonate better with other disciplines in psychology, such as, e.g., sociocultural psychology in the tradition stemming from Lev Vygotsky and Aleksej Leontjev, where many of the perspectives promoted by Martiny are perhaps not new, but welcomed and accepted. Notions such as the extended mind, moving research outside the lab, and the extensive use of interviews belong to its traditional repertoire.

« 21 » Is there a reason why Martiny remains committed to the cognitive tradition in spite of its critique of its basic assumptions, and if so, what might the assumptions be that he still identifies with and sees as constituting the disciplinary unity of the field of cognitive science?

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