

Phenomenological Advice to 4E Cognitive Scientists

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So-called ‘4E-cognition’ is all the rage these days (see e.g.: Gallagher 2017; Newen, De Bruin Gallagher 2018; Hutto Myin, 2013, 2017). Although many different approaches are to be found under the 4E-label, a common trend among them – a(n at least partially) defining trait indeed – is the downplaying or even the proposed elimination of the notion of representation/intentionality.

In this talk I want to stress that this idea cannot be pushed too far because of a pretty obvious, but often neglected, fact concerning intentionality.

Following Kriegel (2011), I argue that there is a clear asymmetry in our attribution of intentional states. Ascriptions of unconscious intentionality to oneself, and ascriptions of intentionality to others, requires charitable interpretations of physical behaviour - as per Davidson 1974. But this is not the case when one attributes conscious intentional states to oneself. The best explanation of this fact, I submit, is that conscious intentional states are directly experienced, and so one need not use interpretations guided by the principle of charity.

If this is so – and to many it seems entirely natural to suppose it is –, then there is a host of experienced intentional states (e.g.: I directly experience, say, my desire to eat pizza, or my imagining a pink octopus).

But if there is conscious or experiential intentionality, then there cannot be a science, or a philosophy, of mind worthy of its name that overlooks intentionality itself: conscious intentionality plays a crucial role in our mental lives, and an accurate account of the mind simply cannot ignore or downplay this role.

Friends of 4E-cognition, then, may well reject representational cognitive science, but they cannot downplay or dispense with representations themselves – an attitude that is furthermore at odds with their often declared fondness of phenomenology.

References

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