

Embodied self-referentiality

Giovanna Colombetti
Department of Sociology, Philosophy, and Anthropology
University of Exeter

Glas's rich article makes several useful points about both anxiety and enactivism, and about how enactivism can help conceptualize anxiety in a suitably complex way. I agree that we need to characterize anxiety as an embedded, context-sensitive and temporally evolving phenomenon with layered symptoms. As Glas points out, the enactive approach has useful conceptual tools for doing so, because of its incorporation of the theoretical apparatus of dynamical systems theory. I am sympathetic with most of what Glas says about this point, so I shall not dwell on it any further.

I want to focus instead on Glas's discussion of self-referentiality, which I found interesting and valuable but also in need of further explication, and possibly not wholly consistent with enactivism. Mainly as an invitation for Glas to say more about this notion, in this commentary I explain where I think his understanding of self-referentiality appears to diverge from some of the core tenets of enactivism.

On p. 8 Glas writes that "emotions are by definition self-referential. If there is no self-referentiality, even after attempts at clarification, the putative emotion is *just a physiological state or a sensation*" (italics mine). I agree with him that emotions are self-referential, in the sense that they reveal something about the person undergoing the emotion. Thus anxiety, for example, reveals "one's vulnerability for being left alone" or "one's fear for failure" (p. 7). This idea is not inconsistent with the enactive approach to emotion and affectivity (although it has not been much discussed), because enactivism acknowledges, like appraisal theories of emotion do, that emotions embody and disclose our interests and values. So enactivists can agree with Glas that an episode of anxiety (as well as of anger, jealousy, and so on) indicates (signifies) something about the person undergoing it—her values, needs, and concerns.

Where the passage quoted above appears to be in tension with the enactivist approach to emotion is in the assumption that "a physiological state or a sensation" is "*just*" that. Here Glas's claim echoes traditional, "disembodied" cognitivist accounts of emotion, according to which bodily arousal and bodily sensations, without accompanying intentional (i.e., world-directed, contentful) evaluations or judgements, are *mere* physiological happenings (see, e.g., Solomon 1984; Nussbaum 2004). Importantly, however, the enactive account of emotion rejects the dichotomy between cognitive appraisals and bodily arousal, and the accompanying assumption that bodily arousal is "*just*" bodily happenings, "*just*" or "*mere*" physiology (Colombetti 2014, chapter 4). A physiological response, be it as part of jealousy or love, but also of panic, hunger or fatigue, is for enactivism a response that is meaningful for the organism undergoing it—it is, at its minimum, good or bad for the organism, and it says something about the organism's relation to the environment. It may well be that physiological responses occur without the person (or even a therapist) being able to say why or what the response is about. This, however, does not make the response a

meaningless “mere” physiological response. If the response does not fit into a clinical narrative and cannot be linked up with the person’s beliefs and evaluations, it does not follow that it is “just” a bodily process. From an enactivist perspective, a physiological response is a sense-making activity and thus a cognitive-affective form of understanding, an implicit embodied way in which the organism appraises its situation. The upshot is that for the enactivist there are no “mere physiological states” that are not self-referential—they all say something about the organism and its inherent normativity (Di Paolo 2005). Notice that this form of self-referentiality need not be accompanied by consciousness. A bacterium presumably does not feel anything, and yet its swimming up a sugar gradient reveals that it evaluates sugar as good for its survival.

This point relates to other passages in the article that it would be useful to hear more about. For example, on p. 11 Glas writes that

embodying an interest is conceptually not the same as self-referentiality, but it is an empirical approximation of it. Self-referentiality is caught in a theory about how emotions help us protect our interests. Emotions reveal our concerns, not so much symbolically, as a form of signification, but psycho-biologically.

As I see it, that emotions embody interests and reveal our concerns “psycho-biologically” is very much what the enactive approach to emotions claims, and entails self-referentiality: an embodied interest, as an interest, reveals something about what the organism in question cares about. It seems that Glas would disagree with this point, but then what is it for “embodying an interest” to be an “empirical approximation” of self-referentiality? It seems, here and in other passages, that Glas wants to draw a separation between non- (or perhaps “quasi-”) self-referential psycho-biological interests and other kinds of interest. The latter may be something like more sophisticated, “cognitive” interests that can enter into a conceptual-discursive narrative, and that as such make emotions properly self-referential—as in the case of Mr A.’s anxiety, which is explained with reference to aspects of Mr A.’s life, personality, and interpretation of his situation (e.g., the incompatibility of the demands of work and family). Placing anxious responses in the context of the person’s history and constructing a narrative that explains those responses is certainly useful to help the person understand and deal with anxiety. But one of the messages of the enactive approach, as I understand it, is also to grant that traditionally “mere” physiological responses reveal something about how the organism makes sense of the situation and environment—and in this sense they are, it seems to me, already properly self-referential.

References

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