

## Wrestling with the Absurd: Enaction Meets Non-Sense

Sebastjan Vörös

*University of Ljubljana*

**Enactive Cognition at the Edge of Sense-Making.** Massimiliano Cappuccio and Tom Froese (Editors). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 317 + xxii pages, \$100.00 hardback, \$95.00 paper.

The volume edited by Massimiliano Cappuccio and Tom Froese, *Enactive Cognition at the Edge of Sense-Making*, is a *challenging* read. It is challenging in that it invites us to discursively engage with, and make sense of, a topic that seems to evade, if not actively defy, discursivity and reason. The book is also challenging in that it forces the reader to grapple with its thick texture and constructs a coherent narrative from a variegated, at times even incongruous, collection of essays. Thus, from the very outset, its content and form seem to be attuned to the same key, namely that of *wrestling with the absurd*, of hermeneutically engaging with the *dissonance of non-sense* so as to tease out the *consonance of sense*.<sup>1</sup> The volume, in short, enacts what it speaks of.

However, lest the potential reader grow weary and pronounce the book not worthy of her time, let me quickly remind the reader of Spinoza's famous dictum that *all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare*. Upon closer inspection, the book turns out to be not only a demanding, but — save a few odd cases, to be explicated below — also a deeply *rewarding* read. The persistent reader is amply compensated for her interpretative struggles: the volume addresses many important, yet frequently neglected questions — questions pertaining to the very ground(lessness) of our knowing and being — and offers diverse solutions that are likely to stimulate fruitful reflection. As such, the volume embodies the *multi-layered fabric of the absurd*: what might seem out of tune from one perspective, may prove harmonious from another (higher) perspective.

The general horizon against which the individual contributions are set is the so-called *enactive* or *embodied turn* that has been haunting the halls of cognitive science for the past two decades. As there has been no shortage of high-quality literature on the topic recently (see Vörös, Froese, and Riegler, 2016, for a comprehensive overview), the main contours of the said turn should probably be well-known by now, so in what follows, I provide but a very brief recapitulation for the “uninitiated.”

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Correspondence should be addressed to Sebastjan Vörös, Aškerčeva 2, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia. Email: sebastjan.voros@ff.uni-lj.si

<sup>1</sup> Lat. *absurdus*: *ab* (away from, out), *surdus* (silent, dull-sounding): incongruous, dissonant, out of tune.

Up until the 1980s and 1990s, the predominant metaphor in cognitive science was the *computer metaphor*: the mind was said to be like software running on hardware, with the latter encompassing primarily the *brain*, and only secondarily — as the comet's tail trailing behind it, as Merleau-Ponty would say — the rest of the body. Correspondingly, cognition was construed as a matter of (i) calculation and (ii) representation, i.e., of (*ad i*) rule-governed manipulation of brain-instantiated symbols that (*ad ii*) represent features of the mind-independent (pre-existing) world. In contrast, the metaphors of embodiment and enaction underline the existential, corporeal, and world-involving aspects of the mind. Thus, the mind has been re-construed as something that emerges from practical, back-and-forth exchanges between the organism and its environment, as a dynamic, emergent pattern that spans the brain–body–environment distinctions. Correspondingly, cognition has been reconceptualised in terms of (i) *embodied action* and (ii) *sense-making*, i.e., as (*ad i*) an ongoing activity of organisms conceived as corporeal, precarious, self-sustaining wholes that (*ad ii*) bring forth (en-act) their unique domains of sense or significance, their world.

In sum, the enactive/embodied turn can be described as a two-pronged shift involving, on the one hand, what Varela termed the “disenchantment of the abstract,” and on the other hand, the “reenchantment of the concrete” (Varela, 1992): cognition is not a matter of (abstract) calculation, but of (concrete) action; it is not a matter of (passive) representation, but of (active) sense-bestowal. And it is this last aspect — the moment of sense-making — that is the centrepiece of the edited volume. If cognition is, indeed, a matter of sense-bestowal, if the world around me, my *umwelt*, is (co)constituted by the *organic episteme* I embody and live through, then what do I make of all the minor and major “breakdowns” that seem to pervade the fabric of my everyday experience? How do I account for the “bodily tension” and the “paradox,” for “the feeling of disorientation, of estrangement, of the uncanny” (Di Paolo, p. xiv)?<sup>2</sup> Or as the editors put it succinctly: “If cognition is essentially a process of sense-making, then how does the enactive approach account for non-sense” (Cappuccio and Froese, p. 8)?

To imbue the inquiry with at least some provisional structure and tentatively chart its trajectory, Cappuccio and Froese go on to identify what they feel are two central issues: “The first problem asks what processes make possible the transition from sense to non-sense (or vice versa) [...]. The second problem asks what makes non-sense possible as such” (p. 20)? However, already at this initial stage, the shadow of the all-pervading non-sense seems to creep in, for, as Nahaniel F. Barrett rightly observes in a previous review of this book (Barrett, 2015), it is only one contributor, Michael Beaton, who actually tackles these issues explicitly. In fact, Natalie Depraz (pp. 125–152) even takes issue with *the very framing of the problem*: the topic of non-sense can be said to pose a special problem for the enactive approach, only if we are willing to accept the equation “cognition = enaction = sense-making.” However, Depraz feels — and I happen to concur (more on this below) — that this is a very problematic reading of enaction, one that diverges substantially from what the originators of the enactive movement (especially Varela) had in mind.

This diversity, in and of itself, might not be a bad thing — there are merits to taking the road(s) less travelled — but in the ensuing polyphony of voices one misses a common theme, an overarching symphony that would weave these different construals into a coherent whole. Bennett does this, to a degree, and I will try to follow suit, albeit from a rather different angle. But before proceeding to the marrow of the (meta)narrative, a quick glance at the more formal aspects of the volume is in order.

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<sup>2</sup> All references or page numbers without publication years refer to authors and chapters from the reviewed book.

The book consists of three thematic clusters — “Theory and Method” (Part I), “Experience and Psychopathology” (Part II), “Language and Culture” (Part III) — and encompasses, together with the Introduction, 12 papers and a short foreword by Ezequiel E. Di Paolo. Individual contributions span an enormously rich array of fields and disciplines, which makes for a scenic, but occasionally bumpy ride: philosophy/theory of enactivism (Cappuccio and Froese), movement science (Dobromir G. Dotov and Anthony Chemero), quantum mechanics (Michel Bitbol), primatology (David A. Leavens), immunology (John Stewart), phenomenology (Natalie Depraz), analytic philosophy (Michael Beaton), psychiatry (Daria Dibitonto), linguistics (Elena Clare Cuffari), Continental philosophy (William Michael Short, Wilson H. Shearin, and Alistair Welchman), shamanism (Juan C. González), and gender studies (Michele Merritt). This disciplinary whirlwind proves to be an ungrateful object of study for the systematist’s eye, all the more so as most authors follow, both methodologically and thematically, their own line of inquiry — some of them to an excessive degree — without paying much heed to other contributions and/or (even) the overarching theme of the volume. Despite this variability, I have tried to lump together approaches with a similar take on the topic, and thus chart a provisional map of the varieties of non-sense.

#### *Equivocal Non-Sense*

In former Yugoslavia, there was no shortage of jokes involving its (in)famous Socialist leader, Josip Broz Tito. One of the jokes involves a schoolboy who was known for his infatuation with horses. Whenever he was required to produce a written assignment, he would, without fail, write about horses. Then, one day, the schoolchildren were asked to write an essay on Tito. The teacher took special care to caution the boy to mind the prescribed title, and not to stray off into one of his horse-enthused panegyrics. The boy happily complied, opening his essay thus: “Among other things, Tito was known for his great love of horses.”

In this first category, non-sense is construed in an equivocal sense (pun intended; as are all that follow): not as the “breakdown,” “herald,” or “horizon” of sense, but rather as a synonym for “foolish,” “illogical,” and “objectionable.” The only example in the volume that fits squarely into this category, leaving no room for a more charitable reading, is the paper by David A. Leavens. Although very interesting in itself — and this bears emphasizing — Leavens’ article is somewhat reminiscent of the humorous story above. Taking on fiercely — and legitimately, one might add — the issue of sampling errors in “object-choice tasks” in primates, with the dire implications of such errors for subsequent data (mis)analyses, the paper mentions non-sense only incidentally, and even then, unashamedly equivocally. Leavens isn’t interested in the problem of non-sense itself; rather, what he is interested in are “nonsensical conclusions” and “nonsensical contemporary scientific claims” (p. 81) that bedevil his field of preference: primatology. Again, a valid endeavour in its own right; yet in the broader context, as appropriate as including a paper on Nietzsche’s “gay science” into a collection of essays dealing with the homosexuality identity-formation.

#### *Focal Non-Sense*

This is by far the most densely populated category. Most papers deal either with concrete examples of the topically circumscribed irruptions of non-sense (Dotov and Chemero; Dibitonto; González; Merritt) or with the general experiential anatomy of such incursions into our everyday lives (Depraz). Non-sense, in this sense, does not relate to *sense in general*, but rather to a *specific* (taken-for-granted) *domain of sense*, and its instances are depicted as “breakdowns” and “incoherences” (Di Paolo, p. xiii), as “frustrations” (Dotov and Chemero, p. 47), “ruptures” (Depraz, p. 124), and “interruptions” in our pre-reflective engagement with (a specific domain within) the world (Cappuccio and Froese, p. 13).

To get a better grip on the experiential contours of such intrusions, let us start with a brief phenomenological sketch. In her paper, Depraz provides a nuanced phenomenological analysis, based on both classical accounts (mostly Husserl; cf. pp. 129–132; 135–139) and her own experimental work (cf. 146–148), of two seemingly similar, yet — as she argues — experientially distinct phenomena, namely *surprise* and *non-sense*. What the two phenomena have in common is that they are both deeply enmeshed in our everyday experience — much more so than the cursory glance would have it — and that they phenomenologically manifest themselves in the form of a *broken time-dynamics*, i.e., as an “experience of a rupture, breaching or caesura in my subjective, time-embedded, flowing continuity, be it small, tiny *qua* quasi-imperceptible [...] or huge *qua* radical” (p. 128).

These ongoing micro- and macro-fissures in the flow of implicit (pre-reflective) anticipations that constitute my lived temporality are then characterized further in light of their distinct emotive and cognitive dimensions (however, in keeping with the enactivist-cum-phenomenological tradition, Depraz maintains that it is impossible to draw a clear line between the two). Emotionally, surprise and non-sense are said to be quite different (p. 126): whereas the former admits of degrees of intensity (it can be tenuous or intense) and is transversal to valence (it can be either positive or negative) [p. 142], the latter is usually more radical and negatively polarized (pp. 141–142). Cognitively, however, the two phenomena appear to be much more alike: by inserting a *rupture* in our ongoing temporal flux, they instantiate a break with our previous beliefs, habits, etc. (non-sense does this more forcibly than surprise), and they open up a *field of indeterminacy* that calls for fresh, creative restructuring of our cognitive schemes and models (p. 143). The absurd — the “puzzling, weird, bizarre, uncanny, and unseemly” (ibid.) — is thus not singularly disruptive, but has, as we will see shortly, an important epistemic role in initiating and, at least partly, governing a two-fold movement of “divergence/discrepancy” and “adjustment/regulation” (p. 145).

Other contributions in this category provide concrete examples of such caesuras and examine the impact of such micro- and macro-fissures on the domains in which they occur. Dotov and Chemero, for instance, demonstrate how phenomenological analyses of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, coupled with a modified version of Gibson’s ecological theory of perception, could be put to good experimental use in movement science. As their starting point, they take the Heidegger-inspired tripartite account of the “breaks” that occur in our everyday handling of tools and the corresponding changes in how we experience entities with which we are engaged (pp. 46–49). If our primary attitude towards the world is one of *absorbed coping*, where entities give themselves to us as ready-to-hand — not as discrete objects, but as “affordances” or “solicitations” (pp. 43–44), i.e., as useful tools that we are skilfully engaged with — disruptions in this ongoing practical flow introduce a split between ourselves and the entities, which are then experienced as unready-to-hand (failing to serve their function, frustrating our engagement with the world) or even as present-at-hand (becoming objects of disengaged, theoretical study).

To demonstrate how this Heideggerian analysis of encountering tools could be “front-loaded” into an experimental setting (p. 47), Dotov and Chemero describe a simple experiment (carried out by Dotov and colleagues; cf. pp. 49–53) based on a computer game (“sheep-herding”), in which the participants “used the computer mouse to control a figure on the screen (the mouse pointer) and to chase another figure inside a circular field” (p. 49). The specifics of the experiment needn’t concern us here; what is important is that the trials were separated into task blocks in which the coupling between mouse and pointer was normal (“match” condition) and those in which there was a mismatch between them (“mismatch” condition). The results showed that, in the latter (“mismatch”) condition, which the authors construed as an example of the intrusion of non-sense, participants responded by behaviourally and

cognitively engaging with the task space: the computer mouse was no longer a ready-to-hand tool they could “see through” when playing the game, as was the case in the “match” condition, but rather an unready-to-hand semi-tool or even present-at-hand “object of attention” (p. 53).

A similar perspective on their respective subjects of inquiry — *language* and *gender* — is taken by Cuffari and Merritt in separate chapters, but with an important twist: they both put greater emphasis on the *cognitive role* played by the irruptions of non-sense in the sense-making process. Cuffari tackles a phenomenon most of us know all too well from our everyday experience, namely the meandering, and often tortuous, process of arriving at mutual understanding among participants in a conversation. Her enactive account of I-know-what-you-know-if-you-know-what-I-mean draws on two main sources: Maturana’s notion of *linguaging*, which — in contrast to the “standard truth-and-world representational” view of language — emphasizes “the more active, probing, communicative, and disclosive aspects of language use” (pp. 207–208); and De Jaegher’s notion of *participatory sense-making* (also evoked, as we will see presently, by Merritt and González), which emphasizes that, in temporary coupling between sense-making agents, an autonomous normative domain is constituted: a domain of shared communal meaning (p. 208).

According to Cuffari, the laborious process of mutually enacting sense in communicative settings consists of three steps (pp. 213, 230): starting from (i) *shared, stable sense*, i.e., sense determined by the collective linguistic habits of the community, we quickly run into (ii) *idiosyncratic non-sense*, i.e., irreducible differences between individual embodiments of these linguistic habits. However, if these are attended to mindfully, which entails letting go of the presupposed communal horizons of meaning and deliberately acknowledging idiosyncratic differences in our sense-making styles (p. 212), we arrive at (iii) *locally produced, co-available sense*, which is a temporary, precarious achievement situated in the middle between full understanding (unattainable goal) and complete misunderstanding (ever-present threat). Thus, in line with Maturana’s claim that a conversation is akin to an existential conversion (p. 207), a dictum many of us can readily relate to, Cuffari argues that if we don’t want to stay trapped on the level of mundane chatter — what Heidegger calls “idle talk” (p. 217) — and want to attain deeper levels of mutual understanding, it is necessary to go through a phase of intense, yet mindful, grappling with idiosyncratic non-sense.

And just as a surge of non-sense can purge the communicative process of the rigid, sedimented structures of meaning, so too can, according to Merritt, the encounter with “nonsensical gender” — a “failure to adopt, adapt to, recognize, or enact the typical norms associated with one’s gender as it is conceived within a binary of male versus female” (p. 286) — loosen the grip of, and helps us transcend our preconceived notions about gender identity. A good case in point are so-called “genderless babies” (e.g., baby Storm, baby Sasha) — babies whose parents decided not to disclose their sex to anyone, which usually evokes strong emotional reactions, ranging from outrage to disgust (pp. 285–286). Merritt feels that the encounters with “nonsensical gender,” be it in the form of genderless babies or transgendered persons, can be valuable on many levels, as they engender breakdowns in our usual ways of living in, and making sense of, the world (p. 295). Specifically, these “frustrations of non-sense” disclose that gender is “not a sign” written in/on our bodies, but rather an “*attitude* we take up,” a “set of norms and rules for making sense of ourselves and others” (p. 289), which is not reducible to a single individual, but constitutes a “distributed network of persons, tools, conventions, and rules” (p. 287). However, such encounters with gender transgressions are not utterly devoid of significance, but are actually replete with meaning (p. 298): they open up space for novel and unique reconceptualizations (p. 296). “Nonsensical gender,” then, is an intrusion of non-sense in our sedimented participatory sense-making practices — an intrusion providing opportunity for critical reflection and creative transmutation of institutional frameworks that subtend our current gender-identification practices.

With its focus on (nonsensical) gender, Merritt's paper makes for a good "transition point" from the everyday, small-scale (Dotov and Chemero; Cuffari) to the more radical, large-scale ruptures in our embodied temporality, as encountered in psychopathology (Dibitonto) and shamanic rituals (González). Dibitonto, for her part, focuses on a particularly powerful and distressing example of encountering non-sense, namely that of schizophrenic delusions. In line with recent phenomenological and enactive construals of schizophrenia, Dibitonto suggests that one of its core symptoms consists in a profound rupture in our embodied (sensory-motor) self-consciousness, which constitutes our fundamental sense of mineness ("ipseity") and is the corporeal anchor of our pre-reflective, meaningful engagement with the world and others (p. 187). Such radical dis-embodiment entails a diminishment or loss of the usual perceptual and conceptual "grip" on reality (p. 188), which is why the patient experiences her body, world, and others as alien and incoherent, eventually becoming unable to distinguish between thought, imagination, and factual reality (p. 191). Dibitonto argues that a crucial, yet frequently overlooked, factor in this move from the dread of disembodied desolation to the quagmire of florid delusion is a progressive and mutual assimilation of perception and imagination (ibid.): there occurs a breakdown in the "as if" structure of the imaginative processes (p. 195), resulting in the patient seeing what they imagine and imagining what they are seeing.

An interesting complement to Dibitonto's analysis is González's portrayal of how drug-induced non-sense has been actively manipulated in traditional and modern shamanic rituals to harbour predominantly positive life-changing experiences González provides a close account of the use of peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*), a drug with well-known hallucinogenic properties, in shamanic rituals of Wixárika Indians from west central Mexico (pp. 277–278). He argues that the role of the drug, when administered in the appropriate ritualistic context under the guidance of the experienced shaman (*marakame*), is to *disrupt* the "habitual operation of the individual's matrix" (a densely interconnected matrix of all cognitive functions of the individual) and to reconfigure it "in order to generate novel experiences with beneficial impact upon the psyche" (p. 278). Shamanic practices can thus be seen as the voluntary induction and amplification of the bipartite process, described by Depraz, of nonsense-induced divergence followed by (re)adjustment. And its impacts can be felt not only on the individual, but also on the collective level, as the impact tends to produce transformative ripples throughout the "communal meta-matrix" (p. 269) brought forth by participatory sense-making.

### *Contrastive Non-Sense*

In contrast with focal non-sense, which is, as we have seen, concerned with the irruption of non-sense in a given circumscribed field, contrastive non-sense *cuts deeper*, laying bare the hidden (existential, cultural) precipices over which our time-honoured epistemic edifices are built. Here, non-sense is not merely a potentially edifying fissure in our everyday coping, but serves as an illuminating contrastive foil that discloses the origins and/or dynamics of our tacit, taken-for-granted modes of not only knowing, but also seeing and being.

A good introduction to this category is Stewart's paper, the bulk of which is dedicated to contrasting two paradigms in contemporary immunology. On the one hand, we have the traditional ("classical") model, where the immune system is viewed as a *linear input-output system* (pp. 106–107): the role of immune system is to detect antigens (noxious "inputs") and produce corresponding antibodies (defensive "outputs") to target and destroy antigens. One of the more pressing problems for this model is explaining why the immune system doesn't turn against the body in which it is housed. Traditionally, the issue has been solved

by the doctrine of *horror autotoxicus*, according to which the immune system perceives everything *except* its own body (pp. 106–107) — an admittedly ad hoc solution, unpalatable to many (Stewart included). Thus, in the 1980s and 1990s an alternative (“autonomous” or “autopoietic”) model was proposed, which views the immune system as *an operationally closed, self-maintaining system* (pp. 107–109). On this model, the role of the immune system is *not* to detect, and respond to, intrusions from the outside, but rather to identify, and compensate for, the irregularities in the coherent functioning of an idiotypic network consisting of densely interconnected “immunoglobulins” (“antigens” in the classical paradigm; the renaming reflects the radically different role these substances play in the new model). Unlike in the classical paradigm, where the immune system is said to be capable of “perceiving” everything *except* its (bodily) self, in the autonomous paradigm, whatever the immune system “perceives” *is* (part of) its self (p. 108), and the “immune reaction” is a systemic attempt to compensate for the relevant perturbations (however instigated) in the functioning of the autonomous network.

The specifics of the two models are not of central importance, however, as Stewart’s reflections on non-sense are mostly concerned with what we can learn from the fact that contemporary immunology seems to contain two internally consistent (conceptually coherent, empirically viable, etc.), yet externally incommensurable paradigms, one of which is almost universally accepted (classical model), while the other one is, for the most part, ignored (autonomous model). How are we to tackle this dilemma? According to what Stewart calls the “objectivist view” of science (p. 119) — the view that is still widely held, if not among philosophers of science, then at least among practicing scientists — that science is based on empirically verifiable facts. So, just do the experiments, and let the facts sort the paradigms out.

However, this is where contrastive non-sense kicks in. Taking on an unabashedly Kuhnesque stance, Stewart argues that, due to the incommensurability of the two paradigms, their proponents are bound to disagree not only on what counts as a valid interpretation of experimental results or on what counts as a valid experiment, but even on what counts as a valid fact. From the objectivist perspective, the co-existence of two epistemically incommensurable paradigms is non-sense: there is no empirical and/or rational way of solving the dispute. For this reason, the contrast between the two paradigms can be seen as a *contrastive foil*, indicating that what, on the surface, might appear as a strictly empirical or rational question, is ultimately a question about *values* (p. 120). Stewart is adamant that this is not to say that “a dimension of objectivity” plays no role in scientific questions, but merely that what is even more important in disputes of this sort, is unearthing and critically examining the subcurrent of values hidden underneath our conceptions of objectivity (p. 121).

Stewart’s reflections are complemented nicely by those of Michel Bitbol. In what I personally take to be one of the most stimulating articles of the volume, Bitbol approaches the problem of non-sense through the famous “quantum enigmas” — the paradoxes that seem to conceptually bedevil quantum theory (e.g., wave–particle duality; problem of measurement; entanglement; pp. 66–72). However, instead of indicating something deeply paradoxical about the innermost nature of reality, Bitbol contends that these “weird paradoxes” (p. 66) disclose, when properly attended to, the inherent difficulties with what is still (tacitly) accepted as the gold standard of scientific cognition, namely representation-making (p. 62). Specifically, quantum enigmas can be useful for two reasons. First, they refuse to be subsumed under a coherent representational system, thus appearing nonsensical from a representationalist point of view. Second, this apparent nonsensicality provides an opportunity for epistemological reflection, an opportunity to unearth, and critically engage with, the existential roots of our fundamental epistemic presuppositions (pp. 62–63).

It is in this last respect that the enactivist framework can be of utmost value, for it demonstrates that representation-making is but a specific, and highly circumscribed, way of meaning-ascription, one that is rooted in a more fundamental (embodied, enactive) manner of sense-bestowal taking place *below* the level of representations (p. 62). In this light, our “large-scale theoretical options” and our “doctrinal pontifications” ultimately stem from, and are fashioned by, our (fundamental) “existential postures,” our “ways of life,” or “modes of being-in-the-world” (pp. 64–65). The latter can, and do, vary immensely — from abstract (dis-embodied, dis-engaged) to concrete (embodied, engaged) — but according to Bitbol, the order of importance we assign to each of them is to no small degree determined by our *cultural values*. Making the abstract mode of being the highest norm can thus be said to reflect one of the prejudices of our Western culture. And it is precisely these tacit cultural–epistemic biases that are being challenged by quantum enigmas: as soon they are disposed of, quantum enigmas turn from (metaphysical) problems that need to be solved to (pragmatic) puzzles that need to be dissolved (p. 66). Seen in this light, quantum theory is not an account of hidden depths of reality, but rather a “systematic inventory of *its surface*,” an “ingenious but purely formal way of anticipating experimental information” (p. 70).

But in order to free oneself from “the transgressive representationalist impulsions” (p. 76), it is not enough to simply *think* differently (e.g., to conceive of cognition not in terms of representation, but embodied action; to see quantum theory not as an account of the nature of reality, but as a useful tool for describing phenomena), one also has to *live* differently (“enact the enaction,” so to speak). This is why, in Bitbol’s view, science might benefit from the work of the Zen Buddhist philosopher Dogen (pp. 75–76). Now, lest the more sensitive readers recoil in horror at the prospect of yet another Capraesque marriage of East and West, let me assure them that their fear is unfounded. Bitbol feels that the greatest benefit of Dogen’s philosophy lies in its *therapeutic function* (p. 64): it provides a valuable conceptual and practical tool for helping us overcome our habitual tendency to (epistemically) grasp after a stable (metaphysical) ground supposedly lying underneath the realm of appearances. So, it is not as if Zen Buddhism were in possession of some age-old ethereal knowledge of the true “nature of things” that science is only starting to dis-cover, but rather that it can serve as a pragmatic antidote to certain entrenched ways of thinking and being from which the scientific community would do well to re-cover.

### *Horizontal Non-Sense*

By disclosing the existential depths (the realm of *Erlebnis*) lying underneath our habitual epistemic practices (the realm of *Erkenntnis*), Bitbol’s reflections bring us to the last, and arguably most thought- and being-provoking category of non-sense. Here, non-sense is not construed as a focal or reflective (non)phenomenon — as a circumscribed breakdown of sense or a contrastive foil to our misunderstandings and/or “misbeings,” respectively — but rather as an all-pervading, yet ungraspable horizon surrounding and subtending sense: the *vital “nough”* which gives rise to both (focal) “is” and (contrastive) “ought.”

To put some conceptual flesh on these bare terminological bones, let us start with what, at first glance, may seem like an unlikely candidate for this category, namely Beaton’s *conceptualist account of perception*. As mentioned, Beaton seems to be the only author who is willing to pick up, albeit somewhat idiosyncratically, the gauntlet thrown down by the two editors. Thus, his chapter, laudable in its argumentative “thickness,” weaves around the following question: “How can non-sense ever become sense for us if perception only presents the world within the existing structures of our understanding?” (p. 153). Meticulously carving out his unique position among the pre-existing conceptual spaces,

Beaton presents us with an interesting, if sketchy, conceptualist-cum-sensorimotor rendition of direct realism. Although there are many aspects of this ingeniously modified McDowell-meets-Noë approach I take issue with, I will, for reasons of space, have to forego an in-depth analysis and focus only on those aspects that are central for our inquiry.

Briefly, and somewhat superficially, for Beaton, to (perceptually) experience the world is (*pace* empiricist non-conceptualism) to (perceptually) experience it in a certain way; and to (perceptually) experience it in a certain way involves (*pro* rationalist conceptualism) to understand it in a certain way, which, in turn, involves the exercise of concepts (pp. 153–162). In one of his creative interpretative pirouettes, Beaton then uncouples the term “conceptualization” from its more standard meaning, which usually includes the use of (linguistic) symbols (incidentally, this is how the term is used by González, cf. pp. 270–271), and links it to sensorimotor abilities of whole agents (p. 162). Hence, according to Beaton, “to perceive is to understand” should not be construed in terms of “reflective rationality” (personal, linguistic), but rather in terms of what he refers to as “entry-level rationality” (pre-personal, sensorimotor). However, if this be the case, one may wonder (as does Adina Roskies) how can we ever learn new perceptual concepts (pp. 165 ff)?

Beaton’s answer is that, even when I don’t understand what I see (this, for him, constitutes the realm of non-sense) I can still be *guided* by the outlines of my understanding (i.e., by the contours of sense; p. 168). Here, two points bear emphasizing. First (a minor point), even if there were a clear line separating sense from non-sense, I can’t see how my being guided by the outlines of my understanding would account for novelty and why it wouldn’t simply mean the “eternal return of the same.” Second (a major point), with his analytic gaze directed intently towards the (possible) irruptions of non-sense through the boundaries of sense, Beaton overlooks the chasms of non-sense pervading the existential landscape underneath his feet. Curiously, Beaton touches upon this briefly when he speaks of “randomness” (as exemplified by “play, exploration, trial and error”), but lets the trail get cold. In this regard, his account serves as a valuable link (in a both *constative* and *performative* sense) between the former and the present category of non-sense: although touching upon the horizon of non-sense, Beaton never really “opens up to it,” which makes it a useful contrastive foil to those who do.

Short, Shearin, and Welchman, with their paper on how, and why, the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze might be useful for enactivist accounts of language (p. 238), are among the few contributors who have sworn allegiance to this last group. To recapitulate briefly, and again somewhat over-simplistically, Deleuze contends that sense is not merely a matter of signification, but constitutes the “element in which human beings exist” (p. 243). It is a “frontier” (p. 244) or a “surface” (p. 245) that emerges at the intersection of the “material” and the “incorporeal” (p. 243), a “cutting edge” (pp. 244, 253) that distinguishes but also articulates the difference between propositions and things (*ibid.*), between a series of signifiers and a series of signifieds (p. 245). In this unique constellation, non-sense is not a mere absence of sense, but rather “enacts the donation of sense” (p. 244), it is the very condition of sense-making (p. 246).

To get a better view of how this enactment of sense from non-sense takes place, Deleuze turns to examples of disorders in the “ordering of sense-making activities,” as these, he believes, are crucial in allowing the sense-enabling non-sense to manifest itself (p. 247). He does so specifically by juxtaposing two types of non-sense: the “Carrollian” and the “Artaudian.” The first type of non-sense is exemplified by a rich array of portmanteau words used by Lewis Carroll in his famous novels (e.g., *snark* = *snake* + *shark*). Although interesting in that it provides ample ground for more embodied and enactivist interpretations (cf. pp. 245–252), Deleuze feels, and the authors concur, that this type of non-sense can ultimately be explicated within the confines of the prevailing linguistic paradigms (p. 252). However,

the same cannot be said of the other, and more profound, type of non-sense, as exemplified by Antonin Artaud's seemingly bizarre translation of Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (undertaken during his stay in the mental asylum) [p. 255].

In Artaud's translation, parts of the text that conform to translational conventions, are interspersed with what looks like onomatopoeic gibberish (cf. pp. 253–254). However, following Deleuze, Short et al. argue that these are not mere mistranslations, but Artaud's linguistic excursions into that subtle region where sense and non-sense intermesh. Unlike the Carrollian non-sense, which touches upon the boundaries of sense only superficially, the Artaudian non-sense, in its schizophrenic breakdown of the proposition/object dichotomy (p. 254), penetrates *into the very bowels of non-sense*. The dynamics of Artaud's seemingly absurd “howl-words (*mots-cris*)” (p. 259), encompassing “submorphological features, syntactic fragments and phonosymbolic (or phonosynthetic) elements” (p. 260), discloses what Deleuze refers to as *subsense* (*Untersinn*) [p. 258], “the abyss where nonsense signals the ultimate inherence of sense [...] within the corporeal realm” (p. 260), and thereby paves the way for “an enactive account of the constitution of (global) sense itself” (ibid.).

Now, although I take issue with several interpretative moves taken by Short et al. (I remain sceptical as to the overall merit of phonosymbolic accounts), I think there is much of value in their Deleuzian construal of enactive linguistics. The only aspect where I feel they err grossly is their simplistic take on Varela's conception of sense-making. I will get to this unfortunate misconstrual shortly; first, a few words need to be said about yet another, and final, attempt to make “the Abyss (*Sans-fond*) speak” (p. 259). When reading of the Artaudian “cries of the body” (p. 253) the reader is likely to be reminded of Heidegger's account of “anxiety” (*Angst*) and the corresponding (non)sense of the “uncanny” (*Unheimliche*), a topic dealt with briefly by Cappuccio and Froese in their introductory paper. Anxiety, for Heidegger, is not simply “common anxiousness” or “fearfulness” (Heidegger, 1929/2008, p. 100), but an *existential (ontological) mood* that discloses the utmost recesses of our being, a mood that pierces, one might say, even *below* the layer of “howl-words” and “bodily noise” (Short et al., pp. 255, 259). In anxiety, Heidegger says, “one feels ill at ease [*es ist einem unheimlich*],” yet one cannot say “what it is before which one feels ill at ease” (Heidegger, 1929/2008, p. 101). My usual engagements with the world come to a sudden halt: “All things and we ourselves sink into indifference [...] We can get no hold of things” (ibid.).

As Cappuccio and Froese rightly point out, this all-pervading sense of malaise is accompanied by the radical “suspension of familiarity” (p. 9), for in their receding into indifference, “things turn towards us,” they glare at us with the “heretofore concealed strangeness” (Heidegger, 1929/2008, pp. 101–102). But in a peculiar interpretative misstep, they then go on to claim that this profound sense of non-sense which emerges from anxiety is not “because the fluid stream of habitual coping with the world had been overlooked, forgotten, or impaired, but because it was *objectified* under the focus of *hyperreflective consideration*, turning it into a petrified factual information” (Cappuccio and Froese, p. 11). Alas, opportunities lost! For in Heidegger, it is precisely *anxiety* — and *not* “hyperreflective consideration” — that “reveals the nothing [nonsensical]”: it is when I “hover” in anxiety that the world of meaning starts slipping away, leaving me with nothing to hold onto but my “pure Da-sein,” the “groundless ground” of my existence (Heidegger, 1929/2008, p. 101). *Hyperreflection* is only one *possible reaction* to the ultimately “repelling” nature of anxiety (ibid., p. 103), a desperate attempt to make sense of this foundational non-sense, and in this regard analogous to most of our everyday activities (engaging in idle chatter, losing oneself in mundane frivolities, etc.).

What gets lost in Cappuccio and Froese's reconstrual is the essential part of Heidegger's account: the recognition of an *ineradicable “lack”* that pervades the innermost fibres of our existence, a lack that precedes and propels all our sense-making activities. It is, as Heidegger

puts it, in the “clear night of the nothing [i.e., non-sense] of anxiety” that “original openness of beings as such arises: that they are beings — and not nothing” (ibid., p. 103). And it is precisely this idea of a lack cowering in the bowels of our being that brings us back to Short et al.’s misconstrual of Varela’s views on sense and non-sense. It is surprising that a volume dedicated to exploring the relationship between enaction and sense-making would avail itself so little of the rich conceptual resources fashioned by one of the founding figures of the enactivist/embodied turn. Far from reducing sense-making to “a kind of transcendental condition” underlying the “the structural unity of organic systems,” as seemingly assumed not only by Short et al. (p. 244) but by most contributors, Varela — at least in some of his later writings — provides a much more nuanced account of the relation between sense and non-sense.

For example, in one of his outlines of the fundamental *bio-logic of the living*, Varela (1991) claims that the latter ultimately consists of two intertwined (“knotty”) dialectics. First, there is the dialectic of identity, a recursive co-determination of “parts” (metabolic nets, neural assemblies, etc.) and “the whole” (cells, sensory–motor body in space, etc.) that establishes the living being as an emergent autonomous unity. Second, there is the dialectic of cognition, a recursive co-determination between “the organism” and “its environment” that establishes a world of sense (a domain of cognitive significance) for this autonomous unity. The two dialectics are, as said, deeply intermeshed: by establishing itself as an autonomous unit (“identity”) the living being simultaneously brings forth its domain of sense (“cognition”), i.e., the aspects of the environment that are relevant for it to maintain its identity. Further, this loopy dialectical process is ongoing: every successful (if temporary and partial) coupling of the living being with its environment changes both the living being and its environment, and thus instigates another dialectical cycle. And finally, because of this ongoing circulation between “identity” and “cognition,” the whole process is driven and subtended by an *ineliminable lack*: cognition as sense-making is always action about what is missing for my identity-formation, a bringing forth of viable sense that is delineated against, and motivated by, the life-threatening non-sense (ibid., pp. 99, 86).

Thus, from its formative years, the notion of enaction was suffused with this ongoing dialectic of sense and non-sense: cognition, as rightly pointed out by Depraz (p. 149), is not sense-making *period*, but sense-making punctuated by the irruptions of focal non-sense and pervaded by the (all-pervading) horizontal non-sense. And although I have, especially in the last part of the review, painted non-sense mostly in dreary colours (anxiety, cries of the body, etc.), this needn’t be the case, for it is also the cradle of our *openness* to unexpected possibilities and our *receptiveness* to the Other (ibid.). As such, it is the birthplace of play, exploration and trial-and-error (Beaton, p. 169), of humour, Zen koans and (surrealist) art (Cappuccio and Froese, p. 17). It is, in the last resort, what inspires us to wrestle with the Absurd and what, on a lighter note, drives us to persist in finishing this book — and reap its rich fruit.

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