

OUT OF OUR HEADS AND INTO SOCIETY:  
REFLECTIONS ON THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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In these remarks, I will only discuss in passing many things with which I agree in Alva Noë's books. For instance, his notion of consciousness as arising from a "dynamic interaction" (2009: 164) of organism and world. Or his notion of the virtual – "experiential presence is virtual *all the way in*. Experience is fractal and dense" (2004: 216-17; emphasis in original) – which I articulate with Deleuze's notion of the virtual in recent works (Protevi 2009; 2010). Furthermore, it's not that I \*disagree\* with Noë on the points which follow; it's just that I would like to extend the argument a few more steps, using his own logic, as opposed to an external critique.

"The political economy of consciousness" means political conditions in which consciousness – however that may be defined: access, agency, self-consciousness – is attenuated or even put out of the picture entirely. I'll discuss a number of such situations in this talk: 1) discipline and Rational Choice Theory; 2) military training; 3) development and the "body politic"; 4) "end of life" issues.

DISCIPLINE AND RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY

Noë notes in *Out of Our Heads* the possible treatment of dogs as "a merely mechanistic locus of conditioned response" (2009: 27-28). He goes on to say we can do the same with human beings, noting that part of our horror at the Nazis lies in their "objectified, mechanistic attitude to human beings" (28). But we don't have to go that far. We can look at other much more mundane areas of socio-political practice that try to render irrelevant the effects of subjective agency by rendering behavior predictable, either in mass, by neo-liberal economic practices which seek to produce the conditions which will in turn produce "rational," that is, predictable, behavior, or by discipline for individuals and small groups (for RCT, see Satz and Frerejohn 1994; for discipline, see Schwartz, Schuldenfrei and Lacey 1979;).

The idea is that in certain forms of political economy consciousness is not eliminated, but is rendered superfluous: it simply doesn't matter what one would "prefer"

in some private interiority, since social constraints can be made strong enough to render the vast majority of actors predictable. We see this in disciplinary institutions at the individual scale: after a certain amount of training, most of the soldiers snap to attention, whether they like it or not. But it's not just the military: Schwartz, Schuldenfrei and Lacey investigate the nexus of behavioristic emptying out of subjectivity and factory discipline:

[W]hile behavior in the workplace now seems to conform to operant principles, it did not in an earlier time, prior to the development of industrial capitalism.... the fit between operant theory and modern work is so close in part because operant principles, in the form of the scientific management movement, made modern work what it is.... successful applications of operant theory do not necessarily confirm the theory. Rather, applications of operant principles to social institutions may transform those institutions so that they conform to operant principles. (Schwartz et al 1979: 229)

On the social scale, consider Satz and Ferejohn's (1994) externalist reading of Rational Choice Theory, where, using an analogy with statistical dynamics, they show that in normalized conditions the structure of a social system is all that need be analyzed. They dispense with the assumption of internal, psychological, rational agents; what they say needs to be studied are social conditions that produce behavior that can be modeled on the assumption of rational agents. "We believe that rational-choice explanations are most plausible in settings in which individual action is severely constrained, and thus where the theory gets its explanatory power from structure-generated interests and not from individual psychology" (72).

Elinor Ostrom, Samuel Bowles, and Herbert Gintis and others in behavioral economics work in this area. A short piece by Ostrom, "Policies that crowd out reciprocity and collective action" (2005), has some important points relevant here to the political economy of consciousness. Ostrom begins by reviewing evidence for strong reciprocators, the presence of which contradicts RCT's assumption that rational egoists (utility maximizers driven only by external rewards / punishments) are the only type of agent that needs to be modeled to account for social behavior. Thus for Ostrom we need to model different ratios of strong reciprocators and rational egoists and how those ratios change over time given different conditions. Strong reciprocators are conditional altruistic cooperators and conditional altruistic punishers. They are concerned with fairness of process rather than only outcomes. Thus they have internal motivations.

If you assume only rational egoists, then you have to design policies with external rewards and punishments. "Leviathan is alive and well in our policy textbooks. The state is viewed as a substitute for the shortcomings of individual behavior and the presumed failure of community" (Ostrom 2005: 254). The kicker is that such policies actually hurt the prosocial behaviors that would exist in their absence. "External interventions crowd out intrinsic motivation if the individuals affected perceive them to be controlling" (260). But internally motivated prosocial behaviors are not supposed to exist in a world of only rational egoists. So we have a self-fulfilling prophecy, or another example of "methodology become metaphysics": you produce the emptied-out, desubjectified reality that you have assumed is needed to model social reality (externally compelled cooperation of a collection of

rational egoists). Remember Satz and Ferejohn: what you study with RCT is social constraint conditions. Properly set up, you can dispense with psychological attribution. RCT is the study of political economy zombies, if you will.

But all is not lost, Ostrom notes. If you design them properly, you can use external systems to "'crowd in' behaviors based on intrinsic preferences and enhance what could have been achieved without these incentives" (254). In other words, there really is, literally, a political economy of consciousness. You can produce scarcity / constraint conditions that render it superfluous so that behaviorist manipulation via external rewards and punishments is not only sufficient for modeling predictable behavior, but also crowds out reciprocity and collective action. Or you can create conditions for its survival and flourishing in the form of internal motivations and concern for fair processes.

## MILITARY TRAINING

I mentioned military training in terms of discipline (old-fashioned close-order drill). Besides Foucault, there's great stuff on the creation of *esprit de corps* via entrainment (marching, singing, drill) in William McNeill's *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History* (McNeill 1995). When push comes to shove, Weber's definition of sovereignty as monopoly on the legitimate use of force (*Gewalt* in German is ambiguous between force, violence, and authority) is put to the concrete test: will the "forces of order" fire on the mob? Think here of the difference between Tiananmen Square and Tahrir Square. Military training needs to negotiate with empathetic relations to the other, one of Noë's primary themes in his attack on the Theory Theory school in *Theory of Mind* (2009: 29-30). There's a lot to be said here (Protevi 2008) but suffice it to say that the US Army was disappointed in the kill-to-fire ratio during WWII following training for accuracy, using bulls-eyes. To up the kill-to-fire ratio during training for the US - Vietnam War, they instituted live ammo human figure training, which seeks to install a reflex that bypasses conscious control entirely. This dramatically raised the kill-to-fire ration, but it probably also played a role in increased rates of PTSD, as the soldier's subjectivity returned to see the results of the firing in a "My God, what have I done?" effect.

But this sort of reflex training is only good for free-fire zones. Urban warfare needs more sophisticated "shoot / no shoot" video training, which is above the reflex level, but needs very fast threshold of consciousness decisions. This training is used with domestic police forces, and there's fascinating stuff here on the neurology of racial perception and rates of false positives / false negatives (Correll, et al. 2006). We can't get into all the details, but this research certainly dovetails point here with Noë's "dynamic interactionist" position whereby brain development is intimately linked with experience, a theme he picks up from Bruce Wexler, to whose analyses we will return.

## DEVELOPMENT AND THE BODY POLITIC

### **The granularity of concepts in 4EA cognitive science**

In the Preface to *Out of Our Heads*, Noë criticizes neuro-reductionistic treatments of depression:

It is simply impossible to understand why people get depressed—or why this individual here and now is depressed—in neural terms alone. Depression happens to living people with real life histories facing real life events, and it happens not only against the background of those individual histories but also against the background of the phylogenetic history of the species. (xii)

I completely agree with the critique of neuro-reductionism, but want to propose a midlevel analysis between sheer idiosyncratic life histories and the evolution of the species. What are we to do with the fact that US women are diagnosed with depression at 2x the rate of US men? The Mayo Clinic and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) websites talk about little else than “hormones.”

This is the same sort of thing Noë critiques. Following Noë out of our heads and into society, the title of an interesting paper by Susan Bordo critiquing the medicalization of anorexia seems apt here: “Psychopathology as Crystallization of Culture.” It should be noted that we’re just getting to the point where feminist analyses of neuroscience are appearing. For instance, Cordelia Fine’s popular treatment, *Delusions of Gender* (2010); I’m happy to say the Palgrave Macmillan series I co-edit with Mike Wheeler will publish the essay collection *Neurofeminsim*, which will include an essay by Fine.

To handle these bio-neuro-social factors, we need a mid-grained conceptual scheme, between the too-fine-grained idiosyncrasies of individuals and the too-coarse-grained discourse of “the human.” The key here is to propose a level of analysis that would not be merely idiosyncratic, but that produces traits that would be reliably repeated (to use the distinction Paul Griffiths and Russell Gray use in discussing Developmental Systems Theory in biology [Griffiths and Gray 2001]) and that would be open to political analysis. This is of course the major problem of feminism, race theory, queer theory, and other such analyses: where to locate the analysis so that you avoid the Scylla of personal anecdote and the Charybdis of ignoring difference altogether. Can we isolate structured subjectification practices that reliably reproduce what we can call a feminized or masculinized body subject? And can we propose that as a philosophical desideratum for the discussion of 4EA cognitive science?

But despite the move to mid-level political categories, I don’t want to give up entirely on case studies, on “real life histories.” We’ll come back to that in discussing end of life issues.

## **Development**

Noë writes in *Out of Our Heads*: “the baby-caretaker 'dyad' is a unity from which the child only gradually emerges as an individual. We can speak of attachment here, but I prefer to speak of oneness” (2009: 50-51). This bothered me, as it seems to neglect the Meltzoff-Moore experiments on neonate imitation, which Shaun Gallagher (2005) interprets in terms of an early body schema of the infant, which would belie the talk of “unity” and “oneness.” We should note the difference between the mere possession of an infant body schema and more mature subjectification processes. But there are some infant researchers, Colin Trevarthen in particular, who insist on a subjectivity of the infant, their active participation in the give-and-take with caregivers (Trevarthen 1999). Others such as Horst Hendriks-Jansen (not a

psychologist but a philosopher) read the same infant developmental literature and emphasize the caregivers' role in "scaffolding" the infant into subjectivity (Hendriks-Jansen 1996: 252-277). This sort of identification and projection of subjectivity via the face is well-placed in forming an emotional bond and in beginning a "scaffolding" subjectivity-inducing loop between infant and care-giver. In any case, I completely agree with Noë that independence-as-isolation is not the correct way to talk about maturation of human beings: "There is no such thing as complete detachment from the community of others" (Noë 2009: 51). But if you're going to do away with isolation as the telos, you should do away with fusion as the arche.

But I also worry about Noë's reading of maturity as "growing comfortably into one's environmental situation," or as "integration" (51). Many people grow up and become mature but precisely into social situations that are disempowering for them, because they belong to disempowered political categories. It's not that this disempowering experience is limited to immigrants, as Noë seems to imply; it's right here at home that many people never quite feel at home, if you see what I'm getting at. Even though it's a great advance to talk about the embodied, embedded, extended, enactive, affective subject (4EA), we shouldn't talk about "the" subject in 4EA work, but about populations of subjects, many of whom suffer disempowering subjectification practices.

### **The body politic**

So, for example, when Noë writes at 2009: 77: "The body is present in our normal, active, engaged experience ... as a range of possibilities of movement and action" I want to say that such an empowered body schema is not available to everyone at all times. Leaving aside for the moment the issue of disability (but what a sentence that is to write!), I also want to refer here to Iris Marion Young's great essay "Throwing Like a Girl" (Young 2005) which discusses the restricted body competence of the feminized body-subject. Young's critique is aimed at Merleau-Ponty, in which the assured competence of the presumably neutral or non-gendered body subject hides a masculinist presupposition. Feminized and masculinized body subjects have different "spheres of competence": a flat tire can appear as a mildly irritating challenge or as an insurmountable problem; a subway entrance as the enticing gateway to the city or as an anxiety-producing danger.

It would be, in my opinion, an unacceptably reductive biologization to generalize the analysis of anorexia Noë gives at 78 ("Her body schema is likely to be just fine.... Her problem is that she feels bad about her body, about how it looks and about her ability to control it.") to cover Young's analysis. In other words, I don't want to say that we all have the same body schema as set of capacities, but that some people have culturally installed distorted body images – in other words, that feminization is a matter of giving people falsely limited opinions about their bodily capacities and / or installing a set of limiting emotional reactions over a body schema that functions just like that of masculinized subjects. Rather – and I think Noë would be open to this approach given his interest in "plasticity" – since our biology is to be open to our culture, we have to locate the analysis of feminization and masculinization at the level of body schema, not just body image.

## END OF LIFE ISSUES

### **Case studies and philosophical methodology**

Although I've stressed the need for mid-level political categories in 4EA analysis, between too-finely-grained idiosyncratic personality and too-coarsely-grained evolutionary stories about "the" human, I nonetheless think case studies can be located as an alternative to thought experiments such as brain transplants, brains-in-a-vat, zombies, Swampman, that whole bestiary. As well as an alternative to X-phil experiments, as when brain scans are done of people tackling the Trolley Problem. Case studies do not aim at identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for an essential distinction, as do thought experiments. Nor are they satisfied with collating fixed responses to ready-made problems (X percent of the subjects pulled the lever, and when they did, such-and-such brain area fired [e.g., Greene and Haidt 2002]).

Instead case studies reveal the outlines of concrete problems, which are the points of intersection of "multiplicities," a Deleuzian term of art which means a "problematic" field in which linked rates of change create conflicting pressures so that (1) any one move changes the conditions for future moves and (2) no one solution exhausts the potentials for future creatively different solutions. James Williams (2005) gives this example: "should we raise interest rates"? Deleuzian problems, the problems of life, cannot be "solved" once and for all; they can only be dealt with. With case studies we come to realize that facing the concrete situation individuates while de-personalizing; we lose our habits to gain our singularity, our uniqueness. I'm going to argue that we should re-conceive the ground for the right to privacy in end of life issues from sovereignty – control of a substantial body – to embodied and embedded singularity – our ability to feel, to generate intuitions that are embodied appraisals of socially embedded situations.

### **PVS, MCS, and "locked-in condition"**

On page 34 of *Out of Our Heads*, Noë writes about the end-of-life issues concerning the difference between PVS (Persistent Vegetative State) and locked-in syndrome:

When the family of a person who has 'become a vegetable' refuses to give up on that person, refuses to consider 'pulling the plug' or 'pulling out the feeding tubes,' what they are saying is that the kind of love and commitment they feel for the daughter or parent or partner is simply incompatible with making the kind of cost-benefit decisions that would justify making the life-ending decision. Others, of course, reach very different kinds of decisions.

There are a number of things to say here relevant to the political economy of consciousness. I've tackled many of them in my study of the Terri Schiavo case (Protevi 2009).

First, there's a difference between respecting the wishes of a person, recorded before the onset of PVS, not to receive feeding tube care after the onset of PVS, and a third-party decision. In the Schiavo case, it was never a third-party decision, but a matter of respecting Terri Schiavo's wishes, as ratified by the courts. I'd say many people think of these decisions as self-centered: "I don't want to be a

vegetable, so please pull the plug on me!" But it's also possible that one can wish not to receive feeding tubes for the sake of others. In other words, you might know that your loved ones could never make that decision on their own, no matter how much they are suffering, so you make it for them.

Second, to be legally ratified, third-party decisions have to be made on a "best interest of the patient" basis. There's a way this could be said to be a "cost-benefit" basis, but just that phrase alone makes it seem like just a monetary decision.

Third, the use of "person" with regard to PVS cases is philosophically fraught. There are many, many issues involved here for which we lack a vocabulary, our words having been outstripped by our technology, but it might be that when a person before the onset of PVS asks not to receive feeding tubes, that the death aimed at here is not suicide (killing the organism in order to kill the person), but "organismcide," that is, killing the organism that used to support a person but is now only the remains of the person, who died when the parts of the brain necessary for generic social interaction were destroyed. Now I completely agree with Noë that "the persistent vegetative state is a problem for morality as much as it is a problem for science" (2009: 34). If we have time, I'll discuss Jeff McMahan's position on these issues in his *Ethics of Killing*.

Fourth, I think we need to support the right of persons to direct in advance that they not receive tubal feeding not just in PVS, but also in MCS (Minimally Conscious State) and the locked-in condition. In MCS, severe cortical damage has occurred, but some, "minimal," cognitive function remains. A catatonic "locked-in syndrome" occurs with no cortical damage, hence full cognitive function, but with a closing off of motor control. I would speculate that most people fear a "locked-in condition" when they don't want tubal feeding, though the only reason to believe an MCS is any better than being locked in would be the lowered cognitive function. An other-directed motivation for refusing tubal feeding would not be to avoid the horror of the locked-in state (though that is horror indeed), but to allow some peace of mind, closure, and the ability to grieve, to come to our loved ones.

### **Excursus: Jeff McMahan's *Ethics of Killing***

Jeff McMahan's *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life* (Oxford, 2002) is a major book; there's no question of anything more than a brief discussion. But he's very clear that you have to take metaphysics, philosophical psychology, neuroscience, politics, and ethics together, and I certainly share that perspective. I'll make three points.

(1) McMahan calls his approach to defining the person the "embodied mind" approach. He changes Derek Parfit's criterion for personal identity (at least half the normal psychological continuity), to any degree of psychological continuity plus *those parts of the brain* responsible for "physical and functional capacities, particularly the capacity for consciousness" (69). But this underplays considerably the radicality of the well-known 1991 book by Varela, Thompson and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*. This manifesto of what became known as the "enactive" school puts cognition and consciousness in brain-body-environment loops. McMahan's approach is really an "embrained mind" and even then has a very questionable

emphasis on the cortex as the site of the "neurological correlates of the contents of consciousness" (21) or NCCC. This leads him to relegate to "marginality" the brainstem contributions to affect as merely "the emotional hue of certain experiences and memories" (21). There's thus some highly questionable assumptions going on here: (1) (emotional) form vs (propositional) content of mental acts; (2) a localist position regarding brain activity; (3) and not only localist, but cortico-centric. A neurodynamicist approach would emphasize the need for integrating activity in distributed brain systems (though to be fair McMahan recognizes this at 86).

(2) McMahan's use of brain transplant thought experiments as establishing the basis of personal identity in those parts of brain subtending consciousness doesn't show what he wants it to show if you think about it from an enactive perspective. Just as Evan Thompson would say that the vat in a brain-in-a-vat thought experiment would really have to be a surrogate body in order to provide the sensorimotor loops needed for consciousness, it seems to me that a brain transplanted into a new body wouldn't be capable of clear consciousness at all (though perhaps it might have a dream state) until it successfully integrated itself with the sensorimotor loops it would have with its new body. And then I think the question of personal identity would be still up for grabs: couldn't we say that the new unit would have a third identity, neither brain, nor body, but the new brain-body unit? Certainly if you define identity as characteristic pattern of social interaction, which I think you have to: that's what "psychological continuity" and "consciousness" amount to: our being is distributed "transversally" rather than being centered in diachronic internal relations of memory of a particular viewpoint on the world (or in sovereign control of an interiority as with those philosophers who define persons as human organisms – McMahan cites van Inwagen here).

(3) So the biggest difference between us is McMahan's substance metaphysics, which is why he performs thought experiments to find out essence, "what we are." But with a dynamic interactional ontology, such as that of Noë, Wexler, and Deleuze, we are what we can do with others. We only "are" in an ever-changing dynamic social field: we (as persons) are a generic pattern of somato-social interaction, while as personalities we are singular patterns. Now what I find fascinating is that there are now proposals to define death licensing organ withdrawal for transplantation as "cessation of engagement with the world" rather than "control of organic function." This latter is precisely sovereignty as control, whereas the former locates the person in a web of social relations. There's an awful lot to discuss here on many levels – not the least of which is that, as Noë insists, following Wexler, the brain only develops somatic, physiological, immunological control properly by being part of embodied social / inter-corporeal / rhythmic / affective relations. We are singular patterns of somato-social interaction.

### **Singularity as the ground of the right to privacy**

To conclude, I want to sketch an argument for re-defining the ground of the right to privacy from sovereignty to singularity, that is, from control of the body to exposure to affect. The turn to rights is never simple in the context of medical discipline and biopower. Foucault describes a "bottleneck" formed by the intersection of the right

to life, medical biopower, and personal sovereignty: "having recourse to sovereignty against discipline will not enable us to limit the effects of disciplinary power.... We should be looking for a new right that is both antidisciplinary and emancipated from the principle of sovereignty" (2003: 39-40). For me, the right to privacy should not be founded on sovereignty, on control, on the subject as ruler of the body, but on singularity, as exposure to intensities that perform a de-personalization. The person should not be seen as the subjective ruler of a sovereign unit, but as a generic pattern of social / somatic interaction. Personhood must be generic; we don't want personality level considerations for personhood.

But it's precisely the potential for the person to depersonalize, that is, for the potential for the generic to become singular that grounds privacy as singularity. Here I argue that depersonalization is an opening to the virtual via the intensity of affect. What do I mean by that? Trapped in habits, we tend to "recognize" situations rather than live them; we tend to fit them into ready-made concepts rather than feel their creative potentials. But by de-habituation or "unlearning" we can open ourselves to the potentials for novel "social affordances."

It is this intense affect of moral intuition generated in concrete situations that lies behind the justification of privacy as singularity. The parties to a case are those who feel most intensely and "accurately," that is, they bring forth or express a certain singular relation of multiplicities forming the problematic field of any one case. It is this singularity that defeats morality as the laying down of abstract rules, and installs a moral particularism which requires that we articulate a principle of singularity for jurisprudence. It is not abstract reasoning about "the sanctity of life" but the intensity and accuracy of affect generated by exposure to the extraordinary that is our guide.

The name of this mutual depersonalization, this intensive becoming, for Deleuze and Guattari? Love. "Every love is an exercise in depersonalization ... and it is at the highest point of this depersonalization that someone can be named, receives his or her family name or first name, acquires the most intense discernability in the instantaneous apprehension of the multiplicities belonging to him or her, and to which he or she belongs" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 35). One of the ways to the new non-sovereign right to privacy we search for must be through such depersonalizing and singularizing love, the sacrificial love that Terri Schiavo had for her loved ones, for her husband and for her parents and siblings, a love that, obscenely, we glimpsed in the media spectacle to which they were subjected.

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