

# Radicalizing Enactivism: Basic Minds without Content

**Dan Hutto and Eric Myin**

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*Review by Kirsten Dierolf*

**T**his book is a stretch intellectually and philosophically. Geared toward an audience of philosophers, the argument in “Radicalizing Enactivism” has the potential to badly shake up traditional psychology and psychotherapy, organisational psychology, therapy, consulting, leadership development, coaching, training and teaching etc. It is a wonderful example how “research at the foundations” can be highly relevant “at the surface” of many examples of daily practice – if daily practice cared to acknowledge the research.

Sadly, philosophical enquiry like Hutto’s and Myin’s is rarely noticed or taken seriously by the above mentioned disciplines (at least the ones that I am familiar with): an earthquake happens and nobody cares – isn’t that a scenario SF practitioners and theorists are quite familiar with? The consolation for SF practitioners is that while the edifices of traditional examples of the above disciplines take a bad hit, the interactionist and constructionist buildings of SF “psych”ology, coaching, training etc. easily ride the waves with a smug grin of “I told you so”.

So – what earthquake? “Radicalizing Enactivism” delineates a thorough and convincing argument for “basic minds without content”, the details of which I will spare you in this review. According to Hutto’s and Myin’s analysis, basic minds do not operate by creating representations of the world or other content in the mind, but rather by engaging with it:

“A prolonged history of interactive encounters is the basis of creatures’ current embodied tendencies, know-how, and skills. To invoke the favorite poetic motto of enactivists this is essentially a process of ‘laying down a path in walking’. The secret to explaining what structures an organism’s current mental activity lies entirely in its history of previous engagements and not in some set of internally stored mental rules and representations.” (p. 9).

Now, I don’t want to pretend that I understand all the philosophical background and intricacies of Hutto’s and Myin’s argument, but to me, their line of argumentation for radical enactive (or embodied) cognition against other possible ways of understanding cognition, content involving cognition and/or conservative enactive (or embodied) cognition makes sense. So here is my first take on two important consequences of assuming “basic minds without content” for our world of SF consulting, coaching, training, organisational psychology and psychotherapy (as limited by the scope of a book review).

### **Laying down a path in walking: rejection of “inner” explanations**

In our Clues document, we describe SF work as: “the focus of SF work is on the interaction between people as described, observed or experienced. We do not introduce systemic or psychological explanatory concepts like inner drivers, inner teams, motivations, systemic structures or hypotheses. Whenever the client introduces concepts with mentalistic words we use his language to talk about observable signs of progress. For example: “what will you notice when x is better motivated? How will you respond? What will your colleagues notice? What else?”

Unlike many other forms of consulting, coaching and therapy, SF does not need to refer to “internally stored mental rules and representations” (Hutto & Myin, 2013, p. 9) to further change into a desired direction. A philosophy of cognitive science which does without “representations” or

“inner states” and assumes “basic minds without content” is very compatible with SF. Instead of talking about these states, we talk about where the person or organisation wants to go in detailed terms and what the person or organisation has already experienced that goes in that direction in order to then identify experimental small steps in the real world.

Theories like NLP, which (in some of its forms) assumes a deep structure of human cognition and claims to be able to influence this deep structure so that a new, more helpful, surface structure can emerge, cannot operate under the assumption that there are no “internally stored mental rules and representations” (Hutto & Myin, 2013, p. 9). The same is true for coaching theories which look for representations of the problem in the body or consulting which classifies people according to their “internal mental rules” such as their preference for detail or the big picture. Concepts of psychology and psychotherapy looking to help the “inner child” or utilise the “inner team” in ways that are more than metaphorical also do not fare well.

### **Communication as co-construction: rejection of sender-receiver model**

A lot of the material taught in communication classes also does not seem to survive Hutto’s and Myin’s shaker as I understand it. I don’t know how often I have seen the “sender”, “receiver” and “blackbox” model in training materials on diverse activities like “leading”, “sales”, “influencing”, “coaching” etc. I am not 100% sure whether it follows, but if perception is a way of interacting with the world rather than the world falling into our minds by way of our senses, then conceptualising “talking about things” as an exchange of “descriptions of content” in our minds does not make sense. Of course, Hutto and Myin talk about “basic minds” – this is where a differentiation might make a difference. However, on a very basic level, I think this idea still holds also for more developed minds.

Steve de Shazer is often quoted as saying, “there is no

understanding, only more or less useful misunderstanding”. Viewing communication as “doing something together” rather than “exchanging content of our minds” has important consequences. Success of a communication can no longer be measured by the extent to which content from my mind ends up in your mind, but possibly rather by what was achieved by it, to which extent new possibilities of interacting with the world were generated by the communication.

Many therapeutic approaches, all coaching approaches other than SF coaching that I am aware of, and most consulting approaches assume that the first step of doing anything is “understanding the client”. The first step is understanding the content of their mind(s), the rules of their mental processes, the second step is an analysis by way of a diagnostic system based on a theory, and the third is the prescription or development of a solution. It seems that all of this crumbles when the rug of “understanding the content” of their minds and analysing the rules of their mental processes is pulled from under their feet.

As you can see – Hutto’s and Myin’s work deserves much more careful consideration than can be given in a short book review. If you are philosophically minded, please read “Radicalizing Enactivism” and continue the conversation with me. I would love to explore the explanatory potential of radical enactive (or embodied) cognition for SF coaching and consulting much further.