

## “How it is”

# Balka’s Black Box and the strengths and weaknesses of the sensorimotor solution: An Introduction

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*“How should I move forward?” you might ask yourself, as you stand at the threshold confronted by the darkness ahead. Many of us learn from an early age to fear the unfamiliar or the unknown. If the unknown is without light, it can become unjustifiably terrifying. How you approach the unknown is unique, as your first encounter with anything can only really be as an individual. Staring ahead into the black void of “How it is” you may wonder whether to move ahead at all. “How it is” simultaneously embodies the unknown and the familiar. The darkness contained in the structure mimics both the architecture of the turbine hall and a shipping container. “It’s fine!” you reassure yourself. What can possibly be inside? “How it is” is only complete when you, the viewer, enter the black hole”<sup>1</sup>.*

The work by Miroslaw Balka, a Polish artist, is a windowless room 13 m high and 30 m long that is designed to create absolute darkness inside. In the Turbine Hall of the TATE Modern, one walks up a ramp into a container like room. This is, how it is:

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<sup>1</sup> The Unilever Series: Miroslaw Balka Tate Modern 13 October 2009 – 5 April 2010. See: <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/unilevermirosławbalka/>

The further one moves into the black box the darker it gets until one cannot see the person beside them. In this instance one momentarily experiences what it is like not to see. Phenomenologically speaking, as the eyes become weaker one becomes more aware of one's body. One explores in a tactile way. For example, one is suddenly very aware of one puts one's feet, and one becomes more attuned to how they automatically use their arms as an extension of one's body. When one reaches the back and feels the furry wall one will no doubt be surprised. Quiet sounds in the distance become loud and prominent in the near vicinity of one's ear. One cannot see. But one can undoubtedly feel what is going on around them. All of this is to help one successfully navigate one's way through the space.

The word "feel" is weighted. I do not intend to pursue an enquiry on the nature of feelings and what it is to ascribe them content. I use the term "feel" to refer no more to the fact that despite lack of vision, one is still explicitly aware of what is going around them; one has a deep and intuitive sense of feeling of the space.

So how does one subjectively come feel these things? In what does one's phenomenology consist? Balka describes the experience of "How it is" as brought about by employing three bodily gestures:

- “1. How? A question one asks themselves concerning the body when standing outside the box: "How should I enter?" This initial feeling of uncertainty makes one feel uneasy.
2. It. One is unsure what exactly is in ahead when one stands at the entrance. The referent of "it" is unknown.
3. Is. One makes the gesture of exploration and discovery through use of one's body. One is ready to use this gesture when one has asked oneself the first question "how". With this understanding one generates knowledge of the correct way to move in the

darkness. One finishes the "sentence", and the "How it is" story is complete."<sup>2</sup>

We could see the composite of these three gestures as entailing epistemological and phenomenological claims. The former is demonstrated by the way one implicitly acquires and uses some form of knowledge to move successfully in the darkness. For example, "how?" is the question one asks themselves when standing outside the box, when trying to formulate the knowledge needed to move in the safest way. The latter, the phenomenology, is described as product of using the body to explore. Take the phenomenological part here to be "Is".

I think we can learn something about the relationship between perception and action by looking at one's experience of Balka's Black Box. I think the way in which one uses their body to experience the black box lends support to the sensorimotor theory, the idea that says one uses sensorimotor knowledge or knowledge of sensorimotor contingencies to guide their actions. This is because in one's experience of the black box the epistemological question of how to move and one's phenomenal experience seem to become part of the same process. There are two important points we can use to defend this claim. The first is that one viscerally feels the space around them in a way that is bodily centred and closely coupled with the environment and the second is the way in which one starts to anticipate more fully the future consequences of one's movement. This forms the basis for my defence of the enactive view of perception and action, and in particular Alva Noë's sensorimotor theory (Noë 2004 and O'Regan and Noë 2001).

But there is a sense in which Balka's description of one's experience of the black box is behaviouristic. The behaviourist says that there is nothing it is like to experience  $x$  that cannot be explained in terms of behavioural

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<sup>2</sup> See interactive site:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/unilevermiroslawbalka/explore/> for Balka's description of "How it is".

dispositions. One could question whether or not the behaviourist is right to make this claim. The enactivist would question this claim because he would say that reducing phenomenology to behavioural dispositions would mean that there is nothing it is like for one to have a certain experience in extent of what can be defined in behavioural terms.<sup>3</sup> But we can counter this claim by showing how enactivism, in fact, provides a skilful alternative to behaviourism. This is in virtue of the way it describes phenomenology as *governed* by skilful interactive processes between the perceiver and their environment. This is not a behaviourist claim because the enactivist wants to make skilful processes prerequisite for phenomenology, and not the same thing as a phenomenological experience.

In defence of enactivism I think we can say that one's experience of the black box is comparable to an experience the enactivist's call "experiential blindness". What is experiential blindness?

One is experientially blind when one still has some sort of normal visual sensation but cannot properly understand the space around them. A good example of experiential blindness is one's experience of a fog-filled room, or driving through fog at night.

In a fog filled room one experiences a homogenous sheet of white. Similar conditions can be achieved in what psychologists call the "Ganzfeld" experiment (Metzger 1930). To achieve the Ganzfeld affect subjects place half a Ping-Pong ball over their eyes to create the illusion of the experience one has in fog filled room. When one experiences the Ganzfeld effect one cannot decipher the figures and shapes in one's environment. The Ganzfeld victim can see the homogenous white, (she is not typically "blind" in this way), but because of the blur distributed across her field of vision she cannot understand or interpret the environment around her. This means that what the Ganzfeld victim sees is bleached of any *content*.

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Dennett (1988) says that this is why he is so keen to stress that he is not denying that experiences seem to have qualia.

In a similar way, when one is driving in fog at night what one can see of the road is bleached of a lot of its content too. One may be able to "see" the road but it may be unclear and blurry. In severe cases boundaries and lanes become almost invisible. In this situation one finds oneself slowing down and adjusting the position of one's body to try to get a better view of the road.

Looking at the experience of Balka's Black Box in this way lends support to my view of perception and action because it is possible to show that one overcomes experiential blindness and the temporary blindness experienced in the black box in the same way: one overcomes not being able to see properly because one understands the future consequences of one's movement.

But if we want to defend the sensorimotor theory then this in turn becomes a defence of some sort of externalism, the view that says not all conscious experience is generated internally by processes within the organism (internalism). I think if we are to successfully defend the sensorimotor theory, (and therefore some sort of externalism), then we must see whether or not it can dissolve the "hard problem" (Chalmers 1996) of consciousness. Chalmers' hard problem is a take on the traditional mind-body problem, (the problem that raises the issue of how to get subjective facts from objective facts). This problem is hard for Chalmers because for him it does not seem possible to reduce qualitative facts or a certain phenomenology such as the "what it is like" to taste pizza to physical processes. Chalmers uses this problem as he sees it to defend a sort of dualism.

But we could say, in fact, that it is the notion of qualia that generates the hard problem. This is because qualia are said to be intrinsic to the organism. The problem is that if experience has qualia that are intrinsic to the organism then internalism must be true. (Remember that internalism says that conscious experience can be fully explained in terms of processes that are located within the organism). The sensorimotor theory presents a challenge to internalism because of the way in which it seeks to explain phenomenal consciousness in terms of partially external processes such as

one's interaction with the environment. I think that the sensorimotor theory falsifies internalism to some extent because of the way it deals with "presence in absence". Presence and absence is one's experience of the sides of things that are hidden from one's view as present, (for example, I have some sort of experience of the back of the apple that is on my desk even though its back is hidden from my view, and in this sense I know that the apple is solid and not hollow).

The sensorimotor theory can explain this particular phenomenon in terms of sensorimotor knowledge that involves a perceiver's interaction with the environment- processes that are located *external* to the organism. In terms of the apple on my desk, I know that picking it up will reveal its hidden side, and this sensorimotor knowledge generates my experience of its hidden back; it's back is present in absence.

That said, one could claim that vehicle internalism is true without accepting that there are qualia. But even if not all vehicle internalists accept the existence of qualia I still think that we could propose the following argumentation. Supposing (for reasons that are worth further investigations) that qualia are necessarily ascribed to internalism, we would be able to show that if there are no qualia then we can in turn show that the vehicle internalist who wants to explain all conscious experience in terms of processes inside the head is being a little too ambitious. This argument is valid in accordance with *modus tollens* (..).

If p then q,	If Qualia (p) then Internalism, (q)
Not q,	Not Internalism,
Therefore,	Therefore,
Not p	Not Qualia

Finally, Joseph Levine (1983) originally said that we lack "an explanation of the mental in terms of the physical" and coined the problem of the "explanatory gap". Frank Jackson's (1982, 1986) take on this problem in terms of the "knowledge argument" is important for us. Jackson put forward the "knowledge argument" as a problem for physicalist accounts of the mind. Physicalists say that all conscious experience can be explained in physical terms or by looking at physical processes.

But the knowledge argument seems to show that subjective processes cannot be described in physical terms. This is because even when we explain all the facts about colour experience in physical terms there remains something that one cannot know about colour experience until one has seen colour for oneself. Jackson makes this point using the thought experiment involving Mary the colour scientist who knows everything about colour but who has been confined to a black and white room since birth, and so has never seen colour from her point of view.

What will the sensorimotor theorist say about Mary learns when she leaves her black and white room? I think it is possible for him to say that all Mary learns when she leaves her black and white room is how to understand her relationship between the appearances of things and how they vary with movement. Mary could not have this sort of understanding whilst she was in the black and white room because Mary had not experienced colour from her first person point of view, she only knew all the objective facts.

But even if we accept that Mary learns something new in this way there is still a sense in which the sensorimotor theory faces a gap of its own. Presenting a new version of the knowledge argument in sensorimotor terms shows that there is an equivocation between procedural knowledge, "know how", and theoretical knowledge, "knowledge that". The idea here is that only with practical "knowledge how" is Mary able to gain the skills she needs to achieve phenomenal knowledge of the colour red. And Mary can only get this "knowledge how" and learn the new skills when she is acquainted with the red rose in the outside world. This shows that "knowledge that" is not the

same as "knowledge how". This translates to the notion that theoretical knowledge alone does not give one practical knowledge, (the type of knowledge that is needed for one to gain sensorimotor skills). Result- there are facts about experience that are not about a perceivers interaction with the environment:

a<sub>2</sub>) Mary knows everything there is to know about a perceiver's interaction with the environment.

*Mary knows everything about a perceiver's interaction with the environment in theoretical or propositional terms- she knows "that".*

b<sub>2</sub>) Mary comes to know something new.

*Mary learns something in procedural or practical terms- she learns "how".*

Therefore,

c<sub>2</sub>) There are facts about experience that are not about a perceiver's interaction with their environment.

*Know "that" ≠ Know "how".*

So there may be more about experience than can be explained in sensorimotor terms. If we still wish to side with the sensorimotor theorist despite the issues raised above then we must see whether or not he can account for subjectivity, why there appears to be "something it is like" for you or I to undergo a certain experience. This problem arises in response to Thomas Nagel's (1974) take on the mind-body problem. Nagel presents the problem by asking us to imagine "what it is like to be a bat".

Enactivists could answer with the statement that subjectivity is embodied. This view can be defend in terms of Merleau-Ponty's (1945) phenomenology and his idea of the body-subject. This is a solution that Hanna and Thompson (2003) give to the mind-body-body problem. According to them, every conscious individual being is its living and lived body (Leib), what is equal to being a human animal (Hanna, Thompson 2003: 3). A lived body includes both an aspect of the body as corporeal being (Körper) and phenomenological aspect related to bodily experience. Therefore it could be understood in terms of two aspects - the subjective and the objective. These are simply two ways of conceiving the experience and the body. I say that this is in some respects similar to Spinoza's (2004 ed.) monism. I leave you with this open question, is that the right sort of metaphysical system in which to understand the mind and the body?

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