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Nick J. Enfield: *Relationship Thinking: Agency, Enchrony, and Human Sociality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 278 pp.

Reviewed by *Corinna Elsenbroich*

This book sets itself a high but noble goal. It aims to show that human action can only be understood from the vantage point of human interaction, i.e., human sociality. Although this might not seem revolutionary to us as humans, it is an ontologically revolutionary project, given that much of social science focuses on the individual and its actions.

In order to achieve the goal, Enfield engages in a multidisciplinary analysis of the human sphere, uniting opposing (e.g., cognitive and behaviouristic) approaches, and bringing together disparate disciplines such as linguistics, semiotics, sociology and anthropology.

The novel hook of the approach is the *enchronic* understanding of human interaction. Rather than seeing single phrases or actions as the relevant unit, Enfield develops the *enchronic frame*, a chunking-up of human interactivity into meaningful units of responses and actions: "A fundamental claim of the approach outlined in this book is that any sequence of 'communicative action' and 'response' is by nature a unit, not a conjunct." (p. 28).

Through the enchronic frame human action is elevated from an action-reaction pattern into an interaction framework. Within this frame, the causal status of single communicative actions is changed from a simple backward looking reaction to a both backward- and forward-looking element of a meaningful whole.

Traditional aspects of human action and interaction, i.e., cognition, action, agency, culture, grammar, and knowledge are then interpreted and understood through the spectre of the enchronic frame. The enchronic frame is grounded in neo-Peircean semiotics providing a mechanism for the interpretation of symbols in a social setting. Rather than just looking at one semiotic process, a succession for interdependent frames constitutes the structure of human social interaction and, in the limit, human action.

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Status, defined as "the collection of rights, duties and dispositions, at a given moment, relative to other members of a social group" (p. 57), provides the background for the interpretation and expectation of actions, continuously inferred in an unfolding enchronic interaction process. Whilst the unit of meaningful analysis is the sequence of communicative actions, a single action within this enchronic frame is called a *move*. A move is, however, more than a narrowly defined communicative action but consists of a "recognizable unit of communicative behaviour constituting a single advancement in an interactional sequence [...]" (p. 63).

This provides the conceptual framework from which Enfield develops the relational social ontology from cognition to culture. The *cognition* needed for this relational life is about the ability to ascribe, anticipate and understand intentions, motivations and actions of others and their understanding of our actions. In discussing *action* Enfield follows Tomasello and Searle but provides more finely grained distinctions to correspond to the data driven conversation analysis. An action is defined within an enchronic sequence: action$_{\text{-en}}$. The action thus does not stand on its own but becomes part of an action-interpretation sequence. Four types of interpretants are distinguished: "affective (someone feels something), energetic (someone does something), representational (someone says something), or ultimate (someone thinks, believes or knows something)." (p. 102). These interpretants can be combined and the list makes clear how conversational and other actions interface and interact in an enchronic frame. The embedding of *agency* into the relational ontology means that agency is not situated within a single agent but joint and distributed agency come to the fore, so that goal directed behaviour becomes "richly social" (p. 117) rather than individual. The social aspects of agency mirror the social aspects of cognition. Through this social understanding of cognition Enfiled makes public what is often seen as purely private and only situated in the individual.

Following this public-making cognition and agency, Enfield proceeds to discuss culture, grammar and knowledge, all three providing higher-level systems of contexts. *Culture* becomes the public context in which agency is executed. It is constituted by rituals (of the every-day and formal variety) as well as physical aspects, such as the architecture of the house, where the designation of rooms engenders particular behaviours. The cultural constraint of agency allows for the continuous display of social relationships through the commitment of membership in a social group. *Grammar* is the next meta-structure, manifesting sociality and relationality in linguistic expressions. Finally, *knowledge* and information are the structure in which social relationships unfold. Information exchange is one of the main aspects of communication but also of social expression. Knowledge is a

manifestation both of common ground and asymmetric exchange. Enfield gives a nice example of how essentially socially embedded information is.

> Why else would it be that if I were to get a promotion, I had better tell my wife as soon as I see her (or better, call her and let her be the first to know), whereas others can be told in due course (my snooker buddies), and still others need never know (my dentist)? (p. 206)

The meta-structures of culture, grammar and in particular knowledge and information link back directly to the discussion of status in chapter 5 and asymmetry in chapter 10.

The book provides a detailed conceptual analysis of the genesis, maintenance and dynamic of human social relationships. The conceptual analysis is grounded in plenty of empirical work based mainly on Enfield's fieldwork in Laos. The use of this real-time data illustrates the framework but also puts a naturalistic perspective to the of the conceptual analysis. Herein lies both the strength and the weakness of the book, for me. Whilst the examples from Laos provide a running narrative I would have preferred the examples to come from a range of human interactions to support the claims that relationships and sociality *universally* constitute the very basis of human action and that the enchronic framework can be used to analyse this. Nonetheless, *Relationship Thinking* is a thought provoking book. It provides a thoroughly argued case for a radical rethinking of social ontology, towards a view which has sociality and relationships at the centre. It also provides a method of enchronic framing together with a semiotic explication, for the analysis of the social world.