

Book Review for *Human Studies*

Alva Noë: *Varieties of Presence*

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Alva Noë has devoted significant intellectual energy to developing and defending *actionism* about perception and consciousness. In his most recent book, *Varieties of Presence*, Noë takes as his subject matter “the central role understanding, knowledge and skill play in opening up the world for [human] experience” (2). While each chapter in this collection was written as a stand-alone essay (many have been previously published elsewhere), Noë has artfully orchestrated the order of the essays and substantially revised them into a coherent narrative that provides us with numerous examples of fruitful applications of his view that “perceptual presence is availability” (33). According to this view, when an object is present to me – in perception or thought – it is available to me. The way it is present is determined by the set of skills (sensorimotor skills, for example) I can use to access that object. Each chapter of Noë’s book explores a different variety of presence and the associated skills of access that make such presence possible. The chapters also move thematically from the scholarship we have for many years associated with Noë – questions of perception and consciousness – seamlessly into his developing work in aesthetics and human nature.

Each chapter follows a similar structure. Noë presents a central philosophical question. He then presents a couple of key approaches to the question (both philosophical and scientific) extant in the literature. From this point, Noë aims to open up new ways of understanding by

shaking his readers free of various conceptual pictures that hold us captive while at the same building on the valuable insights of some of these pictures. These pictures are sometimes derived from psychology and cognitive science and they are sometimes derived from other philosophical perspectives – existential phenomenology, modern empiricism, logical positivism, etc. After presenting these pictures and illuminating the ways in which they hold us captive while providing unsatisfactory answers to our questions, Noë shows us how his view can provide better solutions.

For example, in the Introduction, Noë writes,

Neither the existential phenomenologist's fantasy of absorbed coping, nor the neointellectualist's insistence that our practical skills are somehow best understood as intellectual skills, let alone the outright denial of presence that typifies modern science, have a hope of making sense of the fragility of presence, or of the close interweaving of the practical and the intellectual in our lives. (11)

The reason that getting the phenomenon of presence *right* is so important to Noë is that it is at the heart of how we, as humans, encounter and make sense of our world. How do things that are distinct from us show up for us as useful and graspable and understandable?

While Noë's chapters make substantive contributions to the first-order debates they engage—from the perspectives of philosophers, psychologists, and other inquirers into human nature—my focus in this review will be the methodology Noë both advocates and exemplifies, as this is one of the less obvious but most compelling aspects of the book. In some ways, Noë's book can be seen a kind of user's manual for how to fruitfully think of philosophy's place in

interdisciplinary conversations about the nature of the human mind and human action in the world. While Noë does not conceive of his book in this way, this reading is wholly compatible with his purported aim to help us understand the presence of the world (in perception, in thinking, etc.) as not given to us but as a skillful human achievement. To this methodological end, I begin my remarks with the last chapter of the book: “Ideology and the Third Realm: Or, a Short Essay on Knowing How to Philosophize.”

In order to understand Noë’s approach to philosophical methodology, we need to understand how Noë conceives of philosophy. Noë opens Chapter 5 by calling our attention to the nature of philosophical analysis. He leads us through an argument of Frege’s. When we utter a statement like “the King’s carriage is drawn by four horses”, what are we talking about? Frege argues that this is a statement about a concept, namely, the concept of “four”. He is trying to persuade us of something, notes Noë, but the nature of the thing he is trying to persuade us of is unclear. Frege clearly gets it right or wrong; yet “there is no decision procedure (empirical or otherwise)” we can clearly invoke to decide if Frege is right or wrong about this (137). As Noë writes, “if we wish to understand philosophical analysis...then we need to understand the distinctively in-between—neither entirely objective nor merely subjective—character of [philosophical analysis]” (136). When we come to understand this, we have correctly grasped the “third realm” character of philosophical inquiry.

As is the standard pattern for each of Noë’s chapters, after sharing an insight, he attempts to persuade us of it by first showing us what is misguided about alternative approaches. For example, he claims that experimental philosophers inappropriately apply a single empirical decision procedure to resolve philosophical puzzles rather than recognizing that “whatever people say could be at most the beginning of our conversation, not its end; it would be the

opportunity for philosophy, not the determination of the solution of a philosophical problem” (137). Noë claims that the experimentalists fail to correctly understand the “third realm” nature of doing philosophy.¹ Noë borrows the term “third realm” from Frege, but he argues that Frege did not correctly grasp the nature of this third realm: “Part of what prevents Frege from providing an adequate conception of his own analytical insights is his celebrated and, for all that, misguided antipsychologism” (140). By claiming that thoughts can be both fully grasped and exist in a third realm, Frege makes his own practice incomprehensible, says Noë.

So how are we to preserve Frege’s “third realm” insight in a more practical way? Noë suggests that we use the game of baseball as a model. If we want to understand a home run, we have to understand what role a home run plays in actual baseball-playing practice. Home runs are certainly not “abstract, Platonic phenomena residing outside space and time” (143). But this is exactly what Frege argues in regard to concepts. Noë, instead, wants to tackle the third realm nature of philosophy by arguing this: concepts are not separable from our understanding and practice: “A concept is literally a technique for grasping hold of something in thought” (146). At this point Noë positions himself between the intellectualists and the anti-intellectualists. He claims that both make a similar mistake – the anti-intellectualists claim that perception is not conceptual at all and the intellectualists “fail to allow for the possibility of a perceptual, nonjudgmental use of concepts” (146). Here Noë’s ideas about perception and thought as different styles of investigating the world around us come full circle. He started with the science and philosophy of perception and ends with the science and philosophy of philosophy.

¹ While Noë raises an important general worry here about how we should best understand the nature of philosophical inquiry, he unfairly characterizes experimental philosophy. As experimental philosophers have become more fluent in the empirical methods they employ, their discussions of their data look more like the philosophical conversations Noë lauds and less like attempts to solve philosophical problems once and for all by appealing to the narrow results of a single empirical methodology.

In asserting philosophy as a “third realm” discipline, Noë in no way dismisses the intellectual contributions made by other modes of inquiry about subjects they share with philosophy. In fact, Noë’s preferred methodology provides a framework for productive interdisciplinary conversations that preserves a unique role for philosophy and does not reduce the insights of philosophy to the insights gained by the physical and social sciences. The reason Noë’s methodological insights come at the end of his book instead of at the beginning is because fully understanding them requires fully grasping the main thesis of the book, a thesis that he develops in a variety of contexts and for a variety of purposes. Noë writes,

The value of philosophical conversation, like aesthetic conversation about a work of art, consists not in arrival at a settled conclusion, but rather in the achievement of the sort of understanding that enables one to bring the world, or the artwork, or one's puzzles, into focus. This is the transformation we seek, in philosophy and in art. (127-129)

This insight is made possible by understanding the nature of the achievement Noë has been trying to convince us of throughout his book. In the early chapters, Noë argues that perception is a way we investigate the world. The world is not just given to us, as the empiricists assumed. Rather, we achieve the “presence” of the world through the skills we possess for investigating the world, for bringing it into focus. This same sort of “presence” is achieved in philosophy when we use our skills to bring philosophical ideas into focus. In perception, our skills involve primarily our sensorimotor skills by which we navigate the world, bringing us closer or farther away from certain phenomena. Our background knowledge also plays an important role in the

way we see and navigate the world. In philosophical analysis, we bring the ideas we analyze into focus by using them and examining the practices in which these ideas are embedded.

Modeled after Kant's understanding of aesthetic judgment, Noë's vision of philosophical methodology effectively enables interdisciplinary investigation. If our goal is understanding (the world, an artwork, a puzzle, oneself), and if we aim to persuade each other of positions on important matters and arrive at verdicts that have intersubjective force, and if the methods available to us include primarily the give and take of reasons in which there is no single, predetermined decision procedure by which to resolve disputes, then letting multiple voices in on the conversation is very nearly imperative.

What Noë firmly urges us *not* to do is to reduce all philosophical investigation to some disciplinary science where there is a clear standard by which to measure who is right and who is wrong. When pursuing philosophical questions, we need to remain firmly committed to the "third realm" nature of philosophical inquiry. Although Noë himself doesn't draw the following guidelines for interdisciplinary investigation, these conclusions follow from the methods he extols and exemplifies in his book: when investigating philosophical questions, all voices of all disciplines are welcome at the table, as long as no one attempts to enforce an objective standard of measurement on that inquiry, as if social science surveys will resolve the question once and for all, for example. Allowing for this kind of interdisciplinary inquiry requires us to understand philosophy as Noë does, but also slightly alter our understanding of science. Noë writes,

The thing that needs to be emphasized is that philosophical problems are not the property of philosophy professors. Philosophy arises for natural science; it arises within natural science. To insist on the impossibility of reducing philosophy to natural science is to

acknowledge that natural science is also and must remain, at least sometimes, a philosophical practice. (139)

At the end of the day, however, it is clear that Noë still holds a privileged place for philosophy among the sciences. Philosophy is clearly not “the queen of the sciences” for Noë, but the requirements of “third realm inquiry” do set the standard for interdisciplinary conversations on philosophical themes. If the topic is philosophical,² no one decision procedure can be enforced, but all voices are invited to the table. In practice, in Noë’s hands, this means that he both draws on and challenges insights from neuroscience and psychology as readily as he draws from and challenges insights from both the history and current debates of philosophy.

Noë’s preferred methodology is effectively enacted in Chapter 5, “Presence in Pictures.” Here, Noë puts forth a way of understanding the phenomenon of *seeing pictures* in a way that both draws on the findings of psychology and neuroscience while simultaneously challenging some of the basic assumptions these disciplines make about how to properly understand the phenomenon they take themselves to be studying – *perception*. Noë’s work in this chapter both furthers his general theme in the book while productively engaging particular debates in the philosophy and science of perception.

The central question of Chapter 5 is this – how is it the case that I both see the subject of a picture directly (unmediated by the picture) when I look at a picture *and* that I do not see the subject of a picture when I look at a picture? How do I explain how the subject is clearly present and clearly absent in a picture? Noë begins the chapter by attempting to disabuse us of the common notion that *seeing* is best understood as *representation*. He notes that a standard way of

² This statement, of course, begs the question, as Noë provides no account of how to sort philosophical problems from non-philosophical problems.

thinking of pictorial seeing – especially in psychology – is that “the state we are in when confronted with a picture of shoes is *exactly* like, or very similar to, the state we would be in if we were encountering the shoes themselves” (86). The problem with this view, argues Noë, is that “we lose what is special about seeing in pictures...and *nonpictorial seeing*” (86). This standard view, according to Noë, obscures the fact that “seeing” is a “mode of encounter”.

Noë next criticizes a standard *neuropsychological* approach to *seeing*. According to these accounts “visual experiences have two aspects”: a “pictorial content” and a “feeling of presence” (89). This account has the advantage over the first account of being able to clearly explain the difference between seeing in a picture and seeing in the flesh. Seeing an object in a picture lacks the “feeling of presence” while retaining the “pictorial content.” Noë’s primary criticism of this view is that the empirical data doesn’t support a general disassociation between action-directed vision and visual consciousness.

Noë also rejects the Snapshot Conception of Seeing. According to this view “we represent the environment in consciousness in a picture-like way” (91). But, as Noë argues here and in his other work, it is clear from the psychological data and introspection that this isn’t what we do. We have to peer at and investigate the world to get all the details right. They are not immediately presented to us in perfect uniform detail. We have to act to extract that information from the world.

Because “ideas about pictures have tended to shape the way theorists think about vision”, *seeing pictures* is a “central problem for the study of perception and consciousness, both in philosophy and also in psychology and cognitive science” (82). In Chapter 5, Noë challenges two standard views found in these disciplines. By presenting an alternative understanding of *seeing pictures*, Noë takes himself to have clarified some of the key issues that make a positive

contribution to perception and consciousness studies both in philosophy and perceptual psychology (110).

But what reasons has Noë given us for preferring his understanding of these subjects over the other theories he has countenanced? If Noë has successfully achieved his aim, he has shaken us loose of some of our limiting preconceptions about perception, presence, and philosophy. In doing so, he hopes to have transformed our way of seeing so that we are no longer tangled up in misguided notions, but can see clearly through his favored *actionism*. Not only does Noë hope to have broadened our understanding of how to philosophize and how to understand perception and thought and other styles with which we access the world, he also hopes to “bring ourselves into focus” (131). By understanding philosophy as an aesthetic enterprise, he hopes to deepen our own understanding of our nature as humans.

But is Noë’s *actionism* just another captivating picture from which we need to be shaken free? Noë sees his preferred view of “styles of access” as a way of thinking that cannot hold us captive. This is because a key feature of styles of access is their fragility. While Noë soundly rejects empiricist views that the problem of perception is figuring out how we get what is “outside” our heads to appear “inside” our heads, he is equally wary of views that reduce presence to something “inside” our heads. While this latter view is right to some extent because “our contact with reality is always limited by what we know and can do,” Noë emphasizes that

what we forget is that the liability of disruption, the porous openness of our ways of doing things to doubts and worries about what is required of us, is as much the hallmark of our practices themselves as is the access to the world they enable. (154)

Similarly, in discussing philosophical methodology, Noë is wary of views that attempt to cast philosophy as a wholly “objective” or a wholly “subjective” discipline. Our ways of accessing the world are fragile because these styles arise in practice – they are not given from on high. They are subject to doubts and worries about whether or not we are “getting it right.”

Likewise, Noë’s mode of philosophizing cannot hold us captive because the methods he advocates hold within them their own seeds of doubt and the possibility of a better way of holding philosophical conversations. Noë closes his book with these words: “This is a book about presence, and the idea that presence is achieved. Consciousness is not something that happens to us, it is something we make. Making requires, in addition to motivation, knowledge and skill, a whole situation in which we happen to find ourselves” (155). Similarly, I think it can be said of Noë’s methodology that *this is a book about how to do philosophy, and the idea that philosophical insight is achieved (rather than given). Philosophical insight is something we make (in the give and take of reasons). Making requires, in addition to motivation, knowledge and skill, a whole situation in which we happen to find ourselves.* And that situation is never stable. It is always already open to interdisciplinary intervention, as long as the “third realm” character of philosophical inquiry is never made subservient to a single methodology.