

**Alva Noë**

*Varieties of Presence.*

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Noë's book is actually a collection of "self-standing" essays written "from 2003 to 2011." Noë is, perhaps, best known for other work completed during that time, specifically his 2004 book *Action in Mind*, his book *Out of Our Heads: Why you are not your brain, and other lessons from the biology of consciousness* and his interview on satellite radio with Deepak Chopra, the last two both from 2009. Generally speaking, Noë's work may be seen as helping those in consciousness studies who prefer the vocabulary of, what Deepak Chopra calls, "the reductionist worldview" to incorporate valuable insights gained from phenomenology. So, Noë's book may be contextualized as part of the resurgence of phenomenology in philosophy of mind and consciousness studies; however, as this review will highlight, Noë has a peculiar way of taking up phenomenology.

Essentially Noë has not changed the *Action in Mind* characterization of his position regarding perception, i.e. "perceiving is a way of acting" (2). Unfortunately, despite his laudable affirmation of phenomenology over identity theories of mind, i.e. "you are not your brain," a more than passing engagement with the work of Husserl, Heidegger, or Merleau-Ponty is not present. For example, Noë starts his 2004 book by quoting the Table of Contents from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*: "The Theory of the Body is already a Theory of Perception" (vi), and yet in his Preface Merleau-Ponty states, "Perception is not ... an act ... it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them" (xi), and in this 2012 book, without any reference, Noë writes, "As Heidegger put it, we can be a problem to ourselves" (132).

Chapter Six of *Varieties of Presence* is also published as a chapter of commentary on the debate between Hubert Dreyfus and John McDowell (cf. *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate*, 2013). This chapter allows for insight into Noë's position, then, since his contribution to the McDowell-Dreyfus Debate attempts to resolve their two positions into his own. Whereas Dreyfus may be seen affirming Kant's "blindness" thesis with an affirmation of the transcendental nature of phenomenology, McDowell seems to deny Kant's "blindness" thesis by suggesting perception is permeated with concepts. Noë's attempt at a resolution reads the intuited world as a sensorimotor achievement (12-13). This allows him to then suggest that further acts may achieve a kind of conceptual permeation of the sensorimotor relation (24). This is how Noë arrives at a position which seems capable of harmonizing behaviorism, naturalism, and phenomenology (cf. 69). However, the problem of the necessity and universality of the "achieved world" is just as much a problem for Noë as it was for Kant, and in rejecting the performance of a phenomenological reduction (130) in favor of a reduction to sensorimotor activity, Noë resists affirming the transcendental, i.e. Kantian Copernican revolution, nature of phenomenology. So, Noë's supposed harmonization of the McDowell-Dreyfus debate turns out to be merely apparent.

Explicitly regarding *Varieties of Presence* Noë explains, "This is a book about presence, and its fragility ... a book about style – about the foundational importance of the idea that *we achieve the world* for ourselves through different styles of active involvement" (153). It follows, then, for Noë that if the world is a sensorimotor action achievement, "to this fact – that the world shows up – there corresponds the fact that *we ourselves show up*" (12). In other words, "The world

shows up thanks to our mastery and exercise of skills of access. We achieve the world by enacting ourselves. Insofar as we achieve access to the world, we also achieve *ourselves*" (12-13). Notice, this further separates Noë from transcendental philosophy. The subject is no longer an original power brought into the clearing through a kind of apperception; rather, sensorimotor engagement, according to Noë, is more primordial than the subject itself. This is why Noë repeatedly refers to presence as "very fragile," *the present* subject and the world are contingent upon sensorimotor action.

So when Noë says, "Presence-as-absence is *the* perceptual phenomenon and understanding it is *the problem* of perception" (95), this may be understood in the following way: first, the perception of the *presence of a phenomenon* that can be perceived *depends on* the *presence of the requisite sensorimotor action* of an observer; second, since the presence of a perceptual phenomenon always already, for Noë, means the accomplishment of a sensorimotor action, he has supposedly shifted the problem of perception from how to what. In other words, sensorimotor action explains how a phenomenon is present, so the problem of perception asks about the achievement of conceptuality permeating the already accomplished sensorimotor achievement. Notice, the first move seeks to appease transcendental phenomenology and the second move seeks to appease positions which hope for a discursively saturated world to analyze. From the perspective of theory construction, this is quite a brilliant achievement; however, Noë's non-transcendental arrival at presence-as-absence is a problem for him.

Given Noë's thesis just explicated, he suggests, "I now want to impress on you that *all* perceptual presence is presence as absence. Perceptual presence, as it were, is virtual *all the way in*" (95). Yet, recall as Derrida rightly taught with his essay "Structure, Sign, and Play," there is "tension between play and presence. Play is the disruption of presence" (292). That is to say, "Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence" (292). Derrida's comments here amount to a criticism of the non-transcendental nature of Noë's theory insofar as Noë's use of presence-absence opposition is itself a kind of conceptual achievement which should not be used in the description of the supposedly non-conceptual-prior-to-achieved phenomenon (cf. the thing-in-itself), even if the term of the logically opposed concepts used is "absence." This is why Derrida concluded, "Being must be *conceived* [emphasis added] as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around" (292).

Noë's writing style is allusive; this is praiseworthy and refreshing, and though it is not the writing of Adorno or Deleuze, he may have enhanced his allusions and emphasized the breadth of his reading with annotations. For example, in his section on "The Puzzles of Phenomenology," there is only one citation, and it reads, "E.g. G.E. Moore, Gilbert Ryle" (129). Moreover, he might have alluded to the annotations as a kind of conceptual achievement on his part beyond the accomplishment of writing his thoughts. He asks, "Can we escape the captivity of our habitual structures, of our language and models and pictures?" (154), and unfortunately any reference to Jean-François Lyotard's "The Intimacy of Terror" is absent. Rather, Noë's answer to the above question claims, "Our contact with reality is always limited by what we know and can do and so, as we discussed earlier, there is a sense in which we can never have genuinely new experiences" (154). Yet, it is not clear to whom the "we" is supposed to refer. For example, the use of technology seems a good candidate for being a "new experience."

*Varieties of Presence* seems to keep the problem of technology separate from the problem of perception. However, had Noë pursued technology, he could have examined Marcel Proust's discussion of "real presence ... in actual separation" (*In Search of Lost Time*, Vol. III, p. 175). Ultimately, however, Proust's musings about distant people made present by the telephone might not have resonated well with Noë's reading of presence/absence. Moreover, think of video-conferencing or satellite radio; it seems equally clear that such participants may be conceived of as both present and absent at the event.

Noë concludes *Varieties of Presence* noting, "This is a book about presence, and the idea that presence is achieved. Consciousness is not something that happens in us, it is something that *we* [emphasis added] make" (155). Noë uses a good deal of German in this book, e.g. quoting Heidegger in German for the epigraph of Chapter Seven; however, in his discussion of "consciousness," he does not consider the German etymology. Yet, consciousness as *Bewusst-Sein* immediately lights up for us that consciousness is a kind of being (*Sein*), i.e. an intentional (*Bewusst*) being. In this light the thesis of a subjectless accomplishment of the presence of the subject seems less tenable. Though Noë, unavowedly following Joel Richeimer's critique of the "traditional view" (4) of perception from "How philosophy lost perceptual expertise" (2000, *Synthese*, 385-406), seems to want to separate his thought from the Aristotelian tradition of a *hypokeimenon*, he ends up transposing the subject to a level of sub-conscious sensorimotor activity, ultimately effecting an annihilation of the subject.

Those interested in Noë's work may find reading *Varieties of Presence* rewarding as a touchstone to clarify their interpretations of his work, and the celebration of his engagement with phenomenology by Harvard University Press indicates a praiseworthy trend; however, teasing out the various ways of understanding the "traditional view" along with a deeper engagement with the phenomenological tradition would have greatly strengthened this book. Such a shift in style may, in fact, have opened a different kind of access to the world of perception for Noë and his followers, namely access to transcendental logic.

**Frank Scalabrino**  
University of Dallas