

Enacting Reification: ‘False Consciousness’ as Situated Embodied (Mis)Cognition

The concept of *reification* – denoting the misperception of dynamic complexes and processes as *things* in the sense of ossified unchanging entities – is historically central to critical theory and practice, and in recent years it has been the object of renewed interest. But there persists an objectionable tendency to view it in negative or privative terms – prototypically as ‘false consciousness’ – rather than as a positive phenomenon in its own right. The problem with this does not have to do with the implicit normativity, but with the lack of insight that such views provide into what reified experience involves concretely, in particular concerning the active implication therein of the experiencing subject. Relying on a traditional model of consciousness, most approaches to reification thus ultimately construe it as a fateful kind of manipulation of passive subjects, thereby obscuring how transformative critical practice might be motivated and effected—how, in other words, *de-reification* might be achieved.

In this paper I sketch out a way of rethinking reification on the basis of phenomenological considerations concerning the pre-reflective horizontal-intentional Gestalt structure of perceptual experience, combined with resources drawn from contemporary work on situated and embodied cognition, in particular the dialectical framework of *enactivism*. The idea is to salvage the critical-theoretic import of the concept of reification by coming to more robust material terms with it as a form of embodied cognition – or, if you like, *miscognition* – understood neither as the representation of an ontologically reified world, nor as the ideological misrepresentation of an unreified world, but rather as the mutually generative enactment of a world and a mode of experience based upon the dynamic interaction between perceptual capacities and social environment. Approaching reification in this way can shed strategic light on the possibilities and prospects of overcoming it.

The discussion has three parts. (1) First, I present a phenomenological account of the perceptual experience of *things* in general, in particular how this account reveals the Gestalt character of perception in the sense that discrete things are always experienced in relation to a tacitly apperceived horizontal background. This implies treating cases of reified (i.e., normatively problematic) thing-experience in terms of horizontal inappositeness. (2) Second, I turn to enactivism – especially the work of Francisco Varela, Alva Noë, and Evan Thompson – to consider how horizons supportive of reified perception are formed and instituted in situated interaction. Crucial here is the recognition that such horizons are compensatory in the sense that in certain conditions they provide what R. D. Laing termed ‘ontological security’—however problematic, the reification of the ‘natural attitude’, even construed as a ‘second nature’, is *positively motivated* from the perspective of embodied self-actualization. This suggests that the primary issue in confronting reification concerns ‘nature’ as a narrative of meaningfulness that forms the outermost horizon of perceptual experience and how, if at all, this may be altered. (3) In the final part of the paper, I take up Hanne De Jaegher and Ezequiel Di Paolo’s work on ‘participatory sense-making’ and briefly consider how it might be applied to this dimension of experiential horizontality—how, through embodied social interaction, we could enactively generate an overarching sense of reality that would afford a more normatively defensible perceptual hold on what was previously reified, yet without insupportable loss of ontological security.

Bio: Bryan Smyth teaches philosophy at the University of Mississippi. His research deals primarily with phenomenology and Critical Theory, in particular problems concerning perception, embodiment, and reification. His first book, *Merleau-Ponty’s Existential Phenomenology and the Realization of Philosophy*, appeared in 2013 (Bloomsbury), and he is currently working on two other book projects: *Hyperdialectical Materialism: Rethinking Merleau-Ponty and the Political*, and *Rethinking Reification: Toward a Phenomenological Critique of Critical Theory*.

In addition to other projects, he is also producing the English translation of Merleau-Ponty's *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression: Cours au Collège de France, 1952-53* (Northwestern University Press).