

## ENACTIVISM AND CARE ETHICS: MERGING PERSPECTIVES

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Enactivism can be seen as a non-reductive, naturalistic theory of mind and agency that emerged from a set of biological and phenomenological ideas, inspired also by the Buddhist mindfulness tradition. The ethics of care, on the other hand, has established itself as a normative moral theory inspired by feminist moral philosophy and psychology as well as by some more traditional currents in ethics, such as moral sentimentalism, which it developed further in a novel and innovative manner. This paper aims to show that, despite the *prima facie* differences and separate developmental trajectories, both approaches have put forward, at about the same period of time, a powerful criticism of traditional individualistic and rationalistic accounts of autonomy, cognition, and agency, and have suggested a revision of these notions in terms of a relational ontology with an emphasis on the embodied and situated nature of cognition and agency. The first part of the paper provides a picture of an enactive research program. Its implications for an enactive ethics are discussed as well. In the second part some striking affinities between the enactive approach and the ethics of care are explored.

**Keywords:** Care – Ethics – Enactivism – Agency – Autonomy – Institutions – Transformation – Autism – Exclusion

**Introduction.** The enactive approach in cognitive science and the ethics of care may at the first sight look as if they inhabited two radically different worlds. The enactive approach became known as a non-reductive, naturalistic, scientific theory of the mind that emerged from a set of biological and phenomenological ideas, and was inspired also by the Buddhist mindfulness tradition. The ethics of care has established itself as a normative moral theory that took its inspiration from feminist moral philosophy and psychology as well as from some more traditional currents in ethics, such as moral sentimentalism, and developed it further in a novel and innovative manner. Despite the *prima facie* differences and quite separate developmental trajectories, both approaches have put forward, at about the same period of time, a powerful criticism of traditional individualistic and rationalistic accounts of autonomy, cognition, and agency. Both approaches have suggested a revision of these notions in terms of a relational ontology with an emphasis on the embodied and situated nature of cognition and agency.

In academia there has not yet been, to my knowledge, any single attempt to take a closer look at the affinities and points of convergence between these two approaches or

at the prospective consequences of merging these previously separate perspectives.<sup>1</sup> This paper aims at filling the gap by sketching possible intersections of both approaches at the level of their basic conceptual frameworks and by demonstrating the significance of these affinities at the level of practical implications. In the first section I paint a picture, with a necessarily broad brush, of an enactive research program and I discuss its implications for an enactive ethics. In the second section I explore some affinities between the enactive approach and the ethics of care, arguing that the transformative and participative dimensions of care may be made even more explicit in terms of the conceptual and analytical tools offered by the enactive approach.

## **1. The enactive approach to life, mind, and society**

### *1.1 Enactivism as a research program*

‘Enactivism’ is an umbrella term that is used to describe various related approaches within cognitive science and philosophy of mind that all typically emphasize the embodied, dynamic, and environmentally situated nature of cognition (Herschbach 2012, 470). In what follows, I will focus exclusively on the enactivist tradition whose philosophical foundations have been laid by Varela, Thompson, and Rosch in *The Embodied Mind* (Varela et al. 1991) and which has been further exemplified by Thompson (2005; 2007), Di Paolo (2005; 2009), De Jaegher, Di Paolo (2007), Di Paolo et al. (2010), Froese and Di Paolo (2011). On this particular view, enactivism is “a non-reductive naturalistic approach that proposes a deep continuity between the processes of living and those of cognition. It is a scientific program that explores several phases along this life-mind continuum, based on the mutually supporting concepts of autonomy, sense-making, embodiment, emergence, experience, and participatory sense-making” (De Jaegher 2013a, 5).<sup>2</sup>

Since its emergence more than two decades ago, the enactive approach has established itself as a coherent research framework with a potential to provide a new perspective on a diverse variety of phenomena, ranging from the single cell organism to human

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<sup>1</sup> Cash (2010; 2013) has recently attempted to highlight “important and so far underappreciated parallels between arguments for HEC [the hypothesis of extended cognition] and contemporary feminist arguments for non-individualistic, relational, and socially constituted conceptions of self, autonomy, and responsibility” (Cash 2010, 646). However, the parallels that he considers as “deeply important and well worth exploring further” (Cash 2010, 661) are different from those that I want to bring to the fore in this paper. First of all, it has been argued that the extended cognition hypothesis (even in its socially distributed variant) and the enactive approach are incompatible (Di Paolo 2009; Thompson, Stapleton 2009; Wheeler 2010; De Jaegher 2013b). Secondly, Cash focuses exclusively on feminist accounts of relational autonomy and self, whereas I want to explore the overall ontological and epistemological background, especially of the ethics of care, and furthermore to indicate its implications in several particular fields of practice. Thus, the affinities and parallels proposed here between enactivism and the ethics of care should not be confused with the parallels put forward by Cash. Nonetheless, this does not rule out that there might be important connections between these two ways of drawing parallels.

<sup>2</sup> De Jaegher and Di Paolo admit that “rather than being a set of all radically novel ideas, the enactive approach is better construed as a synthesis of some new but also some old themes” (De Jaegher, Di Paolo 2007, 487)

society and culture (Froese, Di Paolo 2011). Enactivism asks and attempts to answer fundamental questions such as: what is an agent, what is autonomy, why does anything matter to someone (De Jaegher 2013a). The research program of the enactive approach transcends the traditional boundaries of any specific academic field and aims at developing a new discourse that can integrate a diverse set of observations that were previously separated by disciplinary discontinuities.<sup>3</sup> The inherent trans-disciplinarity of enactivism is based on the view that due to the non-linear interdependence of phenomena across all traditionally defined ontological regions it becomes impossible to study any phenomenon, or even a domain of phenomena, in complete isolation (Froese, Di Paolo 2011).

### *1.2 Enactivism and the mainstream cognitive science*

The enactive approach was initially proposed as an alternative to the conceptions of mind and agency in mainstream cognitive science. Enactivism challenged the dominant computational view of mind that conceived of mind as a computer-like input/output system and that regarded cognition as a set of internal mental representations of the external world (Caracciolo 2011). Enactivists reject the traditional idea that cognizing subjects passively respond to external stimuli or simply satisfy their internal demands (McGann 2007). They reverse the picture by stressing that cognitive systems, even on the level of simple life forms, “participate in the generation of meaning through their bodies and action often engaging in transformational and not merely informational interactions; they enact a world” (Di Paolo et al. 2010, 39). On the enactive view, an agent and the significant world in which the agent acts are to be seen as mutually co-constituting or co-enabling (Torrance, Froese 2011).

Enactivism has challenged also another pervasive trait of classical cognitive science, namely its methodological and/or metaphysical individualism. The assumption that the individual cognitive agent is the correct unit of analysis for understanding mind, as well as the exclusive focus on individual agency when seeking to make sense of social phenomena seems fundamentally flawed from the enactive perspective. The individualistic picture of the mind and agency has been replaced in enactivism with a progressively increasing focus on the interactive and social nature of experience and agency (Torrance, Froese 2011).

### *1.3 Enactive account of cognition*

Let us take a closer look at the enactive view of cognition. Enactivists often define cognition in terms of what they call “sense-making”. They use language of dynamical systems theory to describe this process and its complex dynamics. Sense-making, roughly speaking, is the interaction between an adaptive autonomous system<sup>4</sup> and its environment

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<sup>3</sup> Between disciplines, such as biology, psychology, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and robotics, to mention only a few examples of the fields most at issue.

<sup>4</sup> An autonomous system is defined as “a system composed of several processes that actively generate and sustain an identity under precarious conditions” (De Jaegher, Di Paolo 2007, 487).

by which the environment takes on a significance or meaning for the system. Enactivists think of living organisms as paradigmatic cognitive beings and claim “what makes living organisms cognitive beings is that they embody or realize a certain kind of autonomy – they are internally self-constructive in such a way as to regulate actively their interactions with their environments” (Thompson, Stapleton 2009, 24). Thus basic cognition, on the enactive view, is a matter of “establishing relevance through the need to maintain an identity that is constantly facing the possibility of disintegration.” (Di Paolo, Thompson 2014).

This account of cognition has several important implications. First of all, that which makes the world meaningful for a cognitive system is its *concern* governed by the norm of the system’s own continued existence and flourishing. It means that sense-making establishes a *non-neutral* perspective on the world which comes with its own *normativity*. Certain interactions facilitate autonomy of the system, while others degrade it – the former are better, the latter are worse (Di Paolo, Thompson 2014). Sense-making is a value-laden process. Furthermore, sense-making as a profoundly whole-organism enterprise comprises informative as much as affective aspects of meaningful interactions between agent and environment. Thus, enactivism treats cognition and emotion or affect as deeply integrated biological, psychological and phenomenological levels (Colombetti, Torrance 2009); sense-making is an affect-laden process.

Finally, cognition as sense-making is an *embodied* and *situated* process. It is based on needs and goals that come with being a bodily and situated being. De Jaegher points out the complex and non-linear nature of the process by observing that the cognitive agent’s “ways of moving and perceiving, her affect and emotions, and the context in which she finds herself, all determine the significance she gives to the world, and this significance *in turn* influences how she moves, perceives, emotes, and is situated” (De Jaegher 2013a, 1). What is meant by “body”, for the enactive approach, is not the body as a mere physiological and anatomical system defined in terms of inputs and outputs, but rather “a precarious network of various interrelated self-sustaining identities (organic, cognitive, social), each interacting with the world in terms of the consequences for its own viability” (De Jaegher 2013a, 5).

#### *1.4 Enactive account of the social life*

Let us turn to the enactive account of socio-cognitive life. Mainstream cognitive science, as mentioned above, takes the individual cognitive agent as a proper unit of analysis not only for understanding the mind, but also for understanding social phenomena at various levels. The dominant approaches in so-called social cognition research mostly reduce the meaningful engagement between subjects to the inferences or simulations that a passive observer can make about mental states of others based on their external behaviour (Di Paolo and Thompson 2014). Instead, enactivists call attention to participatory and non-individualistic processes and they maintain that “social interaction constitutes a proper level of analysis in itself” (De Jaegher, Di Paolo 2007, 491).

In their seminal paper De Jaegher and Di Paolo put interaction at the centre of their

investigation and argued that interactions are “processes extended in time with a rich structure that is only apparent at the relational level of collective dynamics” (De Jaegher, Di Paolo 2007, 490). They used concepts borrowed from dynamical systems theory and conceived of various kinds of interactions as various types of coupling between systems. On their view, social interaction is “the regulated coupling between at least two autonomous agents, where the regulation is aimed at aspects of the coupling itself so that it constitutes an emergent autonomous organization in the domain of relational dynamics, without destroying in the process the autonomy of the agents involved” (De Jaegher, Di Paolo 2007, 493). De Jaegher and Di Paolo also introduced the notion of “participatory sense-making” to characterize how social interaction opens the possibility of sense-making processes being shared among interacting agents. They defined participatory sense-making as “the coordination of intentional activity in interaction, whereby individual sense-making processes are affected and new domains of social sense-making can be generated that were not available to each individual on her own” (De Jaegher, Di Paolo 2007, 497). From this perspective, it can be said of social beings as interacting sense-makers that they “generate and transform meaning together, in and through interacting” (De Jaegher 2013a, 7).

Froese and Di Paolo (2011) developed the debate further by observing that the description of social interaction offered by De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007) applies even for simple multi-agent systems such as bacterial colonies. Consequently, they argued, the described type of interactions provided a necessary but not sufficient condition for the constitution of properly social significance. On their view the properly social quality of interaction requires “sense of the other agent as such” (De Jaegher, Di Paolo 2007, 21) that can emerge only under fulfilment of an additional condition, namely if “a cognitive agent’s regulation of sensorimotor coupling is *complemented* by the coordinated regulation of at least one other cognitive agent” (De Jaegher, Di Paolo 2007, 23, italics added).

However, the properly social types of interactions and the corresponding forms of participatory sense-making are widely present at many higher levels of animal life. What makes the human kinds of socio-cognitive interactions special and unique within this entire realm, according to the enactive approach, is the fact that they always unfold within a cultural context (Steiner, Stewart 2009; Froese, Di Paolo 2011). Human sense-makers construct shared meanings in their on-going interactions “within the context of a vast array of social ‘givens’” (Torrance, Froese 2011, 45). The agent’s entrance into a cultural domain, similarly to an agent’s entrance into an interactional and a properly social domain, is both constraining and enabling. It requires abiding by a heritage of pre-established social and cultural norms, but at the same time it provides new tools for increasing agent’s autonomy and it expands possibilities of her sense-making and agency (Torrance, Froese 2011). Finally, “it turns out that individuation and socialization are essentially two complementary sides of the same developmental coin” (Froese, Di Paolo 2011, 25).

Let us conclude this section by making explicit the parallel significance of the notion of autonomy and the notion of interaction (relation) for the enactive approach. A living

organism is an autonomous, self-maintaining system due to its regulating interactions with the world. It could not do this without relying on the world. Its precarious autonomy implies dependence on the world (De Jaegher 2013b, 23). Such constitutive and interactive properties emerge at different levels of integrity-generation. Human beings are in their precarious autonomy dependent on the world and on others. At the level of face-to-face interactions, “people are influenced by others and by the dynamics of the interactions that they have with them” (De Jaegher 2013b, 23). They engage in the interactions, but the interaction process can also self-organize and gain an autonomous organization in the domain of relational dynamics. At the socio-cultural level, people are influenced by social and cultural norms and regulations. Moreover, human individuation is essentially a socio-cultural achievement. On the other hand, the enactive approach “gives an account of the social reality of those social norms, by explaining that the existence of the historic force of those social norms is itself constituted by countless interactions, sayings and collaborations in the past; and that their continued existence is constituted by further interactions, sayings and collaborations into the future” (Torrance, Froese 2011, 47).

### *1.5 An enactive ethics*

It has been recently pointed out that explicit discussions of ethical and moral topics had seldom occurred within the enactive tradition (Colombetti, Torrance 2009, 516). Despite this fact, there is a certain ethical inspiration or motivation that might be discerned in the grounding works of enactivism. Only one year after the publication of *The Embodied Mind*, Francisco Varela, one of the volume’s co-authors, argued that new developments in situated and embodied cognitive science enabled a move from traditional ethics of “abstract principles” with its exclusive focus on deliberate, intentional actions of individual agents to a more situated and affectively engaged ethics (Varela 1992).

Colombetti and Torrance (2009) have offered the first explicit proposal of an enactive ethics. They believe that “an inter-enactive account, and particularly the key notion of participatory sense-making, can offer an important new approach to ethics, that could, with sufficient development, be seen as taking a place alongside the various primary ethical ‘paradigms’ that it is common to distinguish within ethical theory” (Colombetti, Torrance 2009, 516-517). They begin by emphasizing the inherently affective nature of participatory sense-making and argue that “making sense of the moral domain is to be seen as a cognitive-affective process, not as an enterprise of some more limited ratio-cognitive sort” (Colombetti, Torrance 2009, 516). This is how the enactive approach may provide a fresh perspective on the traditional ‘reason versus emotion’ dialectic in ethics.

An even a more significant implication of the enactive approach for ethics, on their view, lies in the idea that interactive processes are defined by a certain autonomy which both conditions and is conditioned by the autonomy of the interacting individuals. Colombetti and Torrance attempt to make clear that the enactive shift of our attention from the individual to the encounter has profound repercussions for our understanding of emotion, values and ethics. These researchers highlight, as one of the most important impacts of the enactive approach in the field of ethical reflection, that agent-autonomy is no

longer to be seen in terms of an agent's deliberate individual actions and that "what each of us does in relation to another must, if it is to be fully characterised, be structured in inter-individual or interpersonal terms" (Colombetti, Torrance 2009, 518). An enactive ethics, proposed by Colombetti and Torrance, consequently stresses that "the ethical character of a given situation arises, at least in part, from the meanings which emerge (in a way that is to a greater or lesser degree autonomous) out of the inter-relations between the participants in that situation", and it claims that "different styles of interaction, with their varying affective overtones, will make an ethical difference" (Colombetti, Torrance 2009, 520). Thus the ethical qualities of interactions themselves have to be taken into account as an autonomous target of ethical appraisal.

These views suggest several important shifts in thinking about morality. An enactive ethics invites us 1) to see the ethical content or valuation of a given situation "as emerging as much from the interaction of the participants as from the autonomous decision-making or original authorship of the participants themselves" (Colombetti, Torrance 2009, 523); 2) to de-emphasize the notions of individual autonomy and responsibility; 3) to accept a "liberal share of co-ownership" of morally relevant aspects of agency and situation. Such an enactive approach to ethics provides also a host of reasons for criticizing the traditional ethical theories. Against the background of their enactive perspective, Colombetti and Torrance blame the standard approaches to ethics for being "too exclusively individual-centric in nature, too focused on the alone-in-a-crowd single agent" (Colombetti, Torrance 2009, 517). On their view, most of the dominant ethical theories fundamentally lack "any exploration of the deep ethical ramifications of the participatory, collective dynamics of human inter-relations per se, as opposed to the ethical significance of individual actions and their simple aggregations" (Colombetti, Torrance 2009, 517). Hence the main lesson to be taken from the enactive approach to ethics is that the inter-relational, interactional, and inter-affective dimensions have to gain a central place in our thinking about morality if the latter does not want to miss the very subject of its inquiry.

**2. The enactive approach and the ethics of care.** Presumably anyone at least somewhat familiar with the criticism of standard moral theories that has been put forward within the tradition of feminist ethics and ethics of care can immediately see a number of striking affinities and convergences between these and some of the above discussed enactive views. In what follows, I will focus on widely shared ideas behind care ethics to make clear how they might be linked up with some enactive views of the mind, agency, autonomy, and morality.

### *2.1 Moral ontology and epistemology of care*

In the current of feminist moral philosophy and psychology that inspired the development of care ethics, some three decades ago, two main points of criticism have been made against the standard ethical theories: 1) mainstream approaches to ethics have focused too much on individuals and ignored the moral significance of human relationships; 2) the moral concepts developed by mainstream moral philosophy are ill-suited for deal-

ing with persons understood in relation to one another (Brennan 2010). Instead, feminists and care ethicists proposed a “relational transformation” of traditional moral concepts (a revision in light of relational insights) and argued that persons themselves are best understood in relational terms. Some have seen this as a complete break with the history of moral philosophy, where others have seen it as offering further support for a relational approach to ethics that has been present all along as a minority voice in the tradition of moral philosophy (Brennan 2010; Nagl-Docekal 2008).

The ethics of care can be seen as an approach based on a relational moral ontology and epistemology with a focus on care as the core value. The moral ontology of care is rooted in a fundamentally relational view of human beings (Engster 2007). The ethics of care conceives agents as “mutually interconnected, vulnerable and dependent, often in asymmetric ways” (Pettersen 2011, 53). Care ethicists typically visualize the moral agent in terms of a relational metaphor, such as ‘mother-child-dyad’ (in contrast to a metaphor of an autonomous, independent ‘self-made-man’), in order to stress significant features of human interactions in general, such as reciprocity, dependency, connectedness and asymmetry (Pettersen 2011). The scope of care ethics, however, is by no means limited to the realm of intimate, private relationships. The ethics of care applies the relational model also to moral agents such as groups, institutions, nations, and it advocates strongly abandoning the boundaries between traditionally separated domains of the private and the public (e.g. Tronto 1993; Held 2006; Robinson 2006; Barnes 2012).

The moral epistemology of care rejects the traditional emphasis on abstract moral reasoning and rule following and rather promotes “concrete thinking” (Ruddick 1989) based on the practical experience of embodied, situated agents engaged in inter-individual interaction, as well as on judgments sensitive to particular contextual differences. The ethics of care also offers “a counterbalance to a perspective that emphasises the cognitive and rational dimension of what is to be a human” (Barnes 2012, 14) by stressing that we are embodied and emotional beings to whom affects and emotions say important things about what is of value and how the life can be made better. Cognitive capacities needed in care are acquired through concrete practical-life experience where neither reason nor emotions ought to be excluded. According to some care ethicists, care denotes an approach that “shifts our ethical considerations to context, relationships, and affective knowledge in a manner that can only be fully understood if care’s embodied dimension is recognized” (Hamington 2004, 3). On the basis of these reasons the ethics of care puts considerable emphasis on “respect and sensitivity to both the emotional and bodily dimension of people’s experiences” (Barnes 2012, 15).

Care ethicists argue that the relational model of thinking about moral agents must apply to the core concept of care itself. Held (2006) observes that a caring relationship cannot be reduced to the individual projects, properties, and intentions of the agents involved in it. Rather a caring relationship requires a mutuality that gives birth to a domain of significance that could not have been achieved by the individuals alone. At the same time, however, what produces and sustains the required mutuality are the various practices of agents involved in the relationship, making their autonomy also a necessary part

of the game. Held's description of trust, as a moral principle of care among others, illustrates the complex, relational nature of care: "Trust is a relation between persons, not a value achievable by persons in isolation. The value of trust cannot be divided into the value of the dispositions of the persons in the relation, or to the value of the relation to the individuals involved" (Held 2006, 56f)

The view of care as an altruistic activity of an individual that has been dominant in the standard ethical theories can be criticized from the care ethical perspective as missing the relational nature of care (e.g. Pettersen 2008; 2011). Pettersen introduces a concept of "mature care" to stress that caring is "a relational process in which both the carer and caree participate" (Pettersen 2011, 55). Such an understanding allows seeing care as a process that aims at the flourishing and well-being of all affected through promoting the flourishing and well-being of the relationship as such. Mature care, thus understood, is never a mere mono-directional activity of giving something from the carer to the one cared for. Rather it is a reciprocal and mutual process of negotiating needs and interests of all affected, which is directed by a concern about flourishing and well-being of all affected.

## *2.2 Affinities*

Apparently the rejection of individualist, disembodied and rationalist accounts of human agency, cognition, society and morality that we can find both in the enactive cognitive science and in the ethics of care share much more than a 'common enemy'. I suggest that a positive common ground of both approaches is to be localized in their relational ontologies. They both re-think the concepts of autonomy, individuality and agency in a way that enables a novel reading of human relations in terms of a relative "autonomy" and irreducibility of the inter-relational and interactional domain that is both generated by and generating the relative "autonomy" of the involved agents. On both views, the agents are conceived as essentially embodied, situated and embedded in multiple relational networks at various different levels, such as biological, social, and cultural ones. Concern and emotionality are central to both theories and are considered as part and parcel of any agents' making sense of the world and others.

These two approaches, despite of their origin in rather separate intellectual traditions and academic disciplines, and despite the differences in their overall objective (a non-normative naturalistic theory of the mind and a normative moral theory), might be seen as, at least to some extent, mutually illuminative and informative. The enactive approach as a theory "that aims to capture the underlying relations between the rational, the emotional, the self, the relational, the mind, the body, and experience" (De Jaegher 2013b, 22) may provide a conceptual framework that allows us to see "how methodological individualism may be rejected in a non-mysterian way" (Boden 2006, 59) in terms of a new trans-disciplinary research program. The enactive analyses of the relational interactional dynamics, the analyses of the interplay between agent-autonomy and interaction-autonomy, the analyses of complex relationships between individual, social and cultural aspects of an agent's sense-making and agency, may offer useful analytic tools for further developing

the relational ontology and epistemology of care. The ethics of care, in turn, may offer an elaborated ethical framework for establishing an enactive ethics that would be able to overcome the initial limitation of its scope to the sphere of face-to-face interactions and inter-affectivity. Moreover, the experiential knowledge of care ethics, its sensitivity to the inequalities of power-relations and its developed views of the complex structures and relations at various levels of human social life can provide a useful means of orientation for the enactive approach to the domain of human social phenomena.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the affinities between care ethics, enactivism and enactive ethics see also Urban (2014).

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