European Summer Research Institute 2021

Care for life: Enacting knowledge in an interdependent and uncertain world

While we have known about global environmental changes (climate change, loss of biodiversity, increase of zoonoses …) since decades, we still do not act on them. **How come that there is such disconnection between knowing and effect since the 19th century, and we still do not act on it? How come that there is such disconnection between knowing and acting?** It would be easy to think that the disconnection between our knowing and acting is due to the short-termed nature and little range of our spontaneous human concerns. This kind of explanation is insufficient because it puts the entire burden on us, human agents and producers of knowledge, without questioning the nature of this knowledge, and even less the relations between us and our knowledge.

So, **what is our knowledge?** Our present scientific knowledge was born from a project to subtracting ourselves, our feelings, our values, our judgments, our existential concerns from what is given to us by the senses. This process of self-subtraction was supposed to help us see the world as it is, independently of us, objectively. But the cost of this move—which was necessary to produce a science endowed with this unequalled amount of efficiency—has not yet been fully assessed. As Physicist Erwin Schrödinger pointed out: *"The scientific picture of the real world around us is very deficient. It gives us a lot of factual information, puts all of our experience in a magnificently consistent order, but it is ghastly silent about all and sundry that is really near to our heart, that really matters to us."* [1]

Scientific knowledge provides us with means to our ends, but it says nothing about *which ends* would be really valuable and desirable. It gives us power, but it leaves the *values* that guide our actions lagging behind. It gives us tools to change the world, but it brackets the motivation, and even more the *quality* of the motivation, to act. **We know, but are we motivated to act according to what knowledge reveals to us? We know and we can, but which direction our action should take? We know the causes and consequences of what is the case, but how should we define our purpose?**

Another problem with this worldview is that while the scientific enterprise is accompanied by unparalleled precision and efficacy, somehow all that is left is an endless pursuit of efficiency and exploitation for immediate benefit—with its disastrous consequences for the world at large. **How can we dramatically change the perception of our position in nature, thus accommodating interdependence as more than a word, as a way of being, without jettisoning the amazing amount of information made available from a science whose values are orthogonal to that new stance?** Francisco Varela's theory of enaction—a theory in which an organism doesn't passively perceive the world but instead shapes it and is shaped by it through active interaction with it—is a possible guide.

How can our rising awareness that we are *interdependent* with other human beings and the whole biosphere, become more than abstract knowledge?

Two tools that may be helpful in such a transition are embodiment and mythology. Embodiment because as argued by e.g., David Abram[2], when we partake of nature by our lived body, we automatically become part of it, instead of remaining outside the interdependence. The second tool may be mythology—as Feyerabend[3] suggested, mythology tells us what to do, how to locate ourselves by identifying with its characters, and how to make sense of our lives within nature by projecting ourselves into its *story*.

The purpose of ESRI 2021 will be to consider the question of how knowledge gets transformed into action in the world, and to apply these insights to the big issues of current time, such as the climate crisis but also pervasive feelings of disconnection faced by many.

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Members of the ESRI Arc Committee
- Catherine Bastien-Ventura, France
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[1] E. Schrödinger, Nature and the Greeks, Cambridge University Press, 1954, chapter 7

[2] D. Abram, The Spell of the Sensuous, Vintage, 1997. “Caught up in a mass of abstractions, our attention hypnotized by a host of human-made technologies that only reflect us back to ourselves, it is all too easy for us to forget our carnal inherence in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities. Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth — our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with other eyes, as our ears are attuned by their very structure to the howling of wolves and the honking of geese. To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn these other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence. We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human."

[3] P. Feyerabend, Philosophy of Nature, Polity Press, 2016. “In the past anthropology emphasized … myth functions as a social glue, but it has no cognitive content. In the course of my research I started suspecting that myths have cognitive content as well. Moreover, considering that the mythmakers created culture and advanced it to a surprising extent, that the rise of science led to some canvas-cleaning which more than once has thrown out the bad as well as the good I suspected that there might be cases where science and myth are in conflict, but the myth is right, and science is not.”

Resources on Embodiment & Enaction

- Varela F. J. (1999) Steps to a science of interbeing: Unfolding the dharma implicit in modern cognitive science. In: Watson G., Bachelor S. & Claxton G.

(eds.) The psychology of awakening. Rider, New York: 71–89. Available (free) on Constructivist Foundations website.

- The Embodied Mind by Francisco Varela and co-authors Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch
- Article by Daniel Meling: Knowing Groundlessness: An Enactive Approach to a Shift From Cognition to Non-Dual Awareness. In: Front. Psychol. 12:697821.

ESRI 2021 Tracks & Open Space

A 'thematic track' is a series of 3 short skill-building sessions held every day with the same sub-group of 15-25 to allow for a deeper exploration of a specific topic over the week. All ESRI participants are invited by email to register for a track of choice.

The following four 'tracks' and one 'open space' will take place:

A - 'Investigating the lived experience of (un-)sustainability'

Co-facilitated by Katrin Heimann, assistant professor, Aarhus University; Pascal Frank, postdoctoral researcher, Leuphana University Lüneburg; Maren Michaelsen, postdoctoral researcher, Witten University; Fynn-Mathis Trautwein, postdoctoral researcher, University of Freiburg

Recent scholarship argues that inner states and processes play a crucial role for understanding current unsustainability and initiating changes toward a sustainable future for individuals and society. However, research inquiring into inner dimensions of (un-)sustainability is still very much in its infancy, and so is the search for methods providing access to these inner dimensions. Against this background, this track will reflect on the relevance and potential of first-person research in the context of sustainability.

Based on a general introduction to the topic (session 1), participants will experiment with reflexive diaries and micro-phenomenological interviews as two methods for collecting rigorous and detailed data on lived experience of (un-)sustainable behaviors (session 2). We will conclude by discussing the challenges and potentials of these methods, including the tension between science as an objective method and science as an art of transformation (section 3). All participants are encouraged to engage in a short self-reflection project on related themes (e.g. consumption behavior, experience of nature, self-care) prior to the track in order to ground the workshop on an experiential basis.

B - 'Exploring mindful co-creation and community-building'

Co-facilitated by Enrico Fucci, Dara James, Annika Lübbert, Wolfgang Lukas, Francesco Noera, Mary Rees

This track focuses on co-creating a contemplative intersubjective playground. We facilitate a collaborative space in which we gather and explore needs and ideas for a supportive community of (mindful) researchers: how might such a community grow and support all of its members?

Our exploration will be practical. As facilitators, we rely on the experience gathered in the Mindful Researchers community, where we organise bi-weekly meetings that combine deep listening with playful explorations and more personal (holistic) sharing of our work. As participants, the diverse backgrounds of experience and the current situation that each of you/us brings are equally important elements of the co-creative process. The activities we propose involve social contemplative practices, such as Listening Circles and aspects of Insight Dialogue, and co-creation practices from participatory design and action research.

The three days will roughly follow three steps:
Opening - setting and preparing the co-creative space

Deepening - intersubjective contemplative work

Manifesting - co-creative summary and refinement of elements that have emerged

The Mindful Researchers are a grassroot community which has been gathering since ESRI 2020. We have been inspired by a shared need and aspiration (1) to reconvene our personal contemplative practice with formal research and working commitments, and (2) to explore spaces and gather tools that support us in our work as researchers, while cultivating a contemplative and embodied attitude.

Please also see our Mindful Researchers website

C - 'Dialogues on Francisco Varela's path'

Co-facilitated by Catherine Bastien-Ventura, Ven. Holger Yeshe and Luisa Damiano (ESRI Planning Committee members)

This track, dedicated to the memory of Francisco Varela, proposes a participatory exploration of his research path through dialogues. We will encourage the participants to engage with us in *conceptual dialogues* on Varela's scientific investigation of life and cognition, *resonance dialogues* between this research work and the scenarios of our lives, and *experiences of deep dialogue*s among us, realized through meditative practices.

Our focalization on the explorative power of dialogue relies on the centrality this has in Varela's research, where the notion of "dialogue", or "conversation", indicates an emergent way of conducting science. In a few words: Refusing the classical ideal of

an objective, totalizing scientific inspection of nature, and practicing science as a slow, subtle, attentive, multiple, endless process of interpretation. More concretely: Deciphering the systems populating nature by building a increasing multiplicity of different levels of description, and moving from one level to the other when the systems, through their manifestations, indicate the limits of the observer's descriptive

framework, and suggest directions for its further enrichment and re-articulation. Adopting this methodological approach meant for Varela to reject the classical, Cartesian scientific heuristics of the “monologue”, which proposes the regulative ideal of a scientific observer who explores an inert, independent, transparently accessible natural world from a neutral and external point of view. With the “heuristics of dialogue” Varela opted for the structural openness and inherent uncertainty of a two-way conversation with nature: an explorative interaction involving the scientific observer and the system s/he explores in a symmetrical relationship of knowledge, since both of them are integral, immerse parts of the natural world, and evolve interdependently as systems of the same kind – “observing systems”.

After a brief presentation of the main traits of this heuristics, our track will invite the participants to undertake with us a dialoging co-exploration of the ways in which this heuristic option generated some of the most relevant aspects of Varela’s research on life and cognition, and today can help us to open new paths of investigation – itineraries oriented to deepen our interrogation of ourselves, the others, and the world we share in this era of global changes and pandemic.

The three sessions will combine research in cognitive biology, epistemology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of science and contemplative sciences. They will address key themes and notions characterizing, respectively, Maturana and Varela’s autopoietic cognitive biology, the Varelian theory of autonomous systems, and Varela’s enactive view of mind. Each session will propose a short theoretical introduction, followed by open discussions and meditative practices directed towards deepening the comprehension of the theoretical contents addressed by integrating them into our lives, our experiences and our paths of explorations.

D - 'Being and Moving in Presence'

Co-facilitated by Ven. Ayya Anopama and Hsuan-Hsiu Hung

This is a contemplative space to explore creatively being and moving in relation to others, to allow the unfolding of insights in each other's presence and awareness.

The practice-based track is inspired by relational meditation and the guidelines of Insight Dialogue (originally developed by Gregory Kramer) which are further explored through somatic movement and improvisation. Participants are invited to enter the track space to settle, embody, be and/or move with whatever lingers or emerges in them after each day’s thematic discussions while opening to what is there in the present moment of encountering each other.

The sessions are guided by gentle prompts and invitations, both verbal and non-verbal. We will be and reflect together as a whole group as well in pairs/small groups in break-out rooms for relational exploration, contemplation and response.

In stillness and in movement,
between us,
what’s it like to…

Pause - Stop for a moment. Find here and now. Call forth mindfulness.

Relax, Receive, Allow - Release tension in the body, receive, allow things as they are.
Open - Expand awareness into mutuality; be mindful of internal, external, and both.
Attune to Emergence - Notice and yield to change, to not knowing; allowing change itself to become the object of practice.
Listen Deeply - Listen with the whole body, receive and rest in the world, listening from the silence beneath the words.
Speak the Truth - Discern the inner truth that would be spoken, offer words in kindness.

E - 'Open Space'

In addition and in parallel to the tracks an 'open space' time slot will be offered. You do not have to register for it beforehand.
In this space one can explore innovative and unexpected collaboration within the ESRI community. This specific space will be dedicated to help shape collaborative projects around topics that will be brought by the participants themselves.

How to understand the mind and cultivate the heart

Every day, Mind & Life Europe supports vital work that transforms our scientific understanding of the human mind and its capacity to develop positive mental states. We believe that when contemplative wisdom and practices are fully integrated into modern day science it has the power to act as a catalyst for human and societal flourishing. This is the promise of what we call contemplative science.