Relate to the World(s) at Hand

Poised between readiness and openness,
engage wholeheartedly when called.

"We *always* operate in some kind of immediacy of a given situation. Our lived world is so ready-at-hand... [...] We have a readiness-for-action proper to every specific lived situation." —Francisco J. Varela

"[K]nowing occurs in acting, and when we participate, we are transformed ourselves. This, then, is an ethic of participation: to know how, in acting and becoming together, we transform and are transformed." —Hanne De Jaegher & Ezequiel A. Di Paolo

"Here lies the paradox of solitude. Look long and hard enough at yourself in isolation and suddenly you will see the rest of humanity staring back. Sustained aloneness brings you to a tipping point where the pendulum of life returns you to others." —Stephen Batchelor

"A society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and he must let us know, that there is nothing stable under heaven." —James Baldwin

"In the wholeheartedness of concentration, world and self begin to cohere. With that state comes an enlarging: of what may be known, what may be felt, what may be done." —Jane Hirshfield

"The quality of light by which we scrutinise our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives." —Audre Lorde

"It is not a finished utopia we ought to desire but a world where imagination and hope are alive and active." —Bertrand Russel

Opening Up the Concept

There is good reason why one might look around and feel beleaguered and ill-equipped to countenance the world as it appears before us. The challenges are too numerous and fraught to name here. But let us simply consider the scale of many of the challenges before us: if we take climate change, political polarization, or social inequality, poverty, war, or mass migration, the weaponization of technology, addictive consumerism, or the spread of misinformation, most of us would agree that none of these challenges can be solved by the individual alone. Nor were they meant to be. For none of them are properly within reach of the individual, at least in the way that they appear. And yet, we are still called to relate to them in one way or another.

Being embedded and embodied beings, we need to acknowledge, on one level, the **very localized nature of our agency**, and seek ways to relate to what is already 'at hand' in the conventional sense. By acting from our **situatedness**, and working to **refine our agency in a granular way**, it could be said that we are exercising the only real agency we have. Prof Tim Lenton has spoken compellingly of the tipping points, both negative and positive, that result from an accumulation of localized, grassroots efforts, and this is particularly true in an age in which we are as intensely networked as we are today. Moreover, to suppose we can abide purely in a 'view from nowhere,' as Thomas Nagel[1] has suggested, strips us of the only concrete engagement we can have with the world. The fact is, we always begin from a situated perspective — **our firsthand experience** — and to deny it puts us at risk of perpetuating erroneous assumptions.[2]

But what if we were to nuance the above and question the very premise of a world existing 'out there,' as separate from the lone self 'in here'. If we take the **'view from within'** — an enactive, organism-centered perspective — things begin to look quite different. For example, we begin to see that self and world are **co-constructed and co-evolving**, and that even to speak of the 'world(s) at hand' is somewhat of a misnomer. Because of our intimate entanglement with the world, the world is in some sense **always, already at hand**[3], particularly if we understand the processes that make *self* and *other* possible as **in-between and all around** (E. A. Di Paolo), rather than **in here and out there** (as Cartesian dualism would have us suppose). In this view, acting from a situated perspective necessarily affects a much larger field — beyond, precisely, what is perceptually 'at hand.'

If this is the case, on what can it be said that we are acting? Where does our agency lie if we are so inextricably bound up with the world? What would prevent us from simply resigning ourselves to passive disengagement, precipitous relativism ("anything goes" or "everything is equally valid"), or spiritual bypassing ("all is well" or "all is one")? **How can we *live* in a way that honors the imminence of the world and our entanglement with it, while also taking personal responsibility for effecting change in the world?** Moreover, how can we honor the **plurality of the many life-worlds** that are at play when we consider how to act? Can we imagine "liv(ing) in one world that includes a multiplicity of worlds," as Gábor Karsai spoke of in our November 2024 MLE Community Call? Can we work from the premise of **"difference without separability"** (Édouard Glissant), a vector of heterogeneity, rather than

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[1] See Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, OUP, 1986.

[2] Adam Frank, Marcelo Gleiser, and Evan Thompson make a compelling case for including the subjective perspective in science and other epistemological approaches in their recent book, *The Blind Spot: Why Science Cannot Ignore Human Experience*, MIT Press, 2024.

[3] Going beyond the philosophical tradition of the "present-at-hand" (*Vorhandenheit*) and the "ready-at-hand" (*Zuhandenheit*), we can invoke here the tradition of *phrónēsis*, or practical wisdom, and moral attunement, as Hanne De Jaegher and Ezequiel Di Paolo do in their paper "Enactive Ethics: Difference Becoming Participation," whereby moral attunement requires the "participation of whole bodies in ways that cannot be wholly achieved by acts of deliberation since these acts by definition must abstract and universalise the concrete ethical reality from which they emerge." For a more specific overview of different philosophical conceptualizations of the 'hand' and being 'at hand', see Zdravko Radman, ed., *The Hand, an Organ of the Mind: What the Manual Tells the Mental*, esp. ch. 8, "Phenomenology of the Hand" by Natalie Depraz, MIT Press, 2013.

homogeneity? Is there a **"lived, living logic"** (Hanne De Jaegher) we can draw upon to honor both entanglement and differentiation, immanence and otherness?

Pathways of Engagement. Pathways of Entanglement.

The coming year will be a year in which we consider meaningful ways of engaging, not only from a **theoretical perspective**, as we have begun to do here, but from **pragmatic and aesthetic perspectives** as well. We will spend time — notably at the ESRI — with very tangible questions, such as: How can we inhabit and tend to a planet in dire distress? How should we relate to each other across political chasms? How can we engage responsibly with technology? How can we design educational systems that better reflect the human dimension of us all, while also acknowledging various forms of diversity? How can science and other academic disciplines more responsibly promote conscious, life-furthering action in the world? And, importantly, how can we find meaning in a world where there is not always the time or place to slow down and ask difficult questions — in a world where contemporary political and economic systems seem intent on ignoring the very real vulnerabilities of individuals, especially marginalized groups of individuals?

We will lend a special focus to the **arts** as one such way of slowing down and making meaning of a world — worlds, really — that may confound and confront us. We will consider **art and aesthetics as eminently "relating to the worlds at hand,"** recalling that aesthetics (*aísthēsis*) originally connoted that which comes to us by way of the senses. When we sense the groundlessness that is within, between, and all around us, art can provide an empowered response to what might appear as nonsensical, or indeed, surpassing meaning. By taking a lateral, or sideways, approach to the very concrete challenges of our time, by activating free play and imagination (as Amy Cohen Varela reminded us in the recent MLE Community Call), artistic experience can open up possibilities hitherto unnoticed, and strengthen the creativity of our responses. It is a way of **touching the world, and being touched by it**, using the materials at hand to **generate meaning, while also making meaning concrete**. Perhaps most powerfully, art allows us, in the words of Amber Carpenter (November 2024 MLE Community Call), "to imaginatively enter into the realities that others live in and the worlds they imaginatively construct."

Some Further Questions We Might Consider

- Unpacking the phrase "Poised between readiness and openness, engage wholeheartedly when called":
    - How can we skillfully hold the **tension of being both ready and open**, without collapsing into either extreme?
    - How do we know when we're ready to act, especially when acting requires that we reconcile ourselves with the essential messiness of the world(s) at hand?
    - How do we act without shutting down the openness and receptivity that originally coaxed us into action?

    - **How is a situated position a wholehearted position?** How do we abide in our situatedness while simultaneously keeping an open horizon of understanding (Hans-Georg Gadamer)?
    - What does it mean to engage *wholeheartedly* — with neither haste nor excessive hesitation?
    - In our wholeheartedness, how do we guard against fanaticism and dogmatism?
    - What **qualities of the heart** are required in science and other academic disciplines for times such as these?
- **Does remaining open mean that we must adopt a value-neutral position?** How can we **act on behalf of life-furthering values** (thereby taking a normative stance in some sense) while not shutting down differing discourses and opinions? How can we learn to act ***across and with differences***, rather than despite them?
- How do we attend to what is close to home without falling into a form of parochialism or prejudice?
- How can we act in ways that **neither overdetermine nor underdetermine** the situational dynamics at hand?[4]
- What does **knowing** have to do with **being** and **doing**?[5] How does good epistemology and ontology lead to good ethics, and vice versa?
- **How can enaction and participatory sense-making aid us in understanding and refining our sense of agency in the world(s) we are co-creating?**
- Do these epistemological and ontological paradigms actually help us in making better decisions and interacting more skillfully with others? What does all this have to do with the sociopolitical challenges we are witnessing today?[6]

As always, these questions are proposed as mere starting points, and we hope that they will inspire further questions from within the different disciplines represented in this year's opening panel. It could be said that, in the spirit of participatory sense-making itself, MLE dialogues can operate on both the descriptive and the prescriptive levels, acknowledging that these questions are meant to help us **describe more accurately the world(s) at hand**, while also indicating that there are **better and worse ways of making sense of such worlds**, of knowing and acting within them. Francisco Varela himself observed, following the Chilean coup d'état, that erroneous epistemologies create the conditions for societal strife and political violence. We cannot separate the two: our epistemologies inform our ethics, and our ethics reverberate in our epistemologies. So, in this spirit, we hope that our collective exploration in 2025 will yield not only **better questions and better descriptions**, but **better ways of relating to the world(s) at hand**.

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[4] See Hanne De Jaegher, "Loving and Knowing: reflections for an engaged epistemology" in *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 20 (2019).
[5] See especially p. 245 in Ezequiel A. Di Paolo and Hanne De Jaegher, "Enactive Ethics: Difference Becoming Participation" in *Topoi* 41(2) (2021).
[6] As a powerful example of such possibilities, see Elena Clare Cuffari and George N. Fourlas, "Enacting Ought: Ethics, Anti-Racism, and Interactional Possibilities," in *Topoi* 41(2) (2022).