Empowering through Caring

> *Power is fortified not just by what it destroys, but also by what it creates. Not just by what it takes, but also by what it gives. And powerlessness reaffirmed not just by the helplessness of those who have lost, but also by the gratitude of those who have (or think they have) gained.*
>
> —Arundhati Roy

> *To care ethically is to be morally attuned to* differences *in becoming and to act in ways that cultivate, nurture, protect, and/or repair configurations of becoming according to values. Caring for the sick and vulnerable is to help them revert a narrowing in their world. Caring for growth is to promote the value of openness and expansion in possibilities of becoming. Caring for the oppressed is to act so as to destroy patterns of blocking and neglect towards actors whose becoming is systematically thwarted. And so forth.*
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> —Hanne De Jaegher & Ezequiel A. Di Paolo, "Enactive Ethics: Difference Becoming Participation"

Most of us would like to believe in a **form of power that is woven through with care**, and a form of care that is robust enough to withstand the winds of the political arena. Yet, on most days, we are witness to a flagrant lack of care on scales of increasing alarm, as well as the many perversions of a global order that still abides by an ethos of "power over." In 2026, we will turn our attention to this paradoxical situation, using the epistemological tools we have at hand, from the enactive tradition and adjacent traditions, to **critically assess the relationship between power and care, as well as our relationship to the dynamics of power and care of which we are co-constitutive**.

If we take seriously the **continuity between life and mind**, then it would make sense to regard the conditions of our mind as none other than the conditions for the power structures that we are witness to in the world today—many of which are up for a critical reappraisal. What then are the **conditions of (embodied) mind** that would allow us to arrive at alternative expressions of power? How can we understand the **possible alliance** between power and care? How might the two terms be linked in a way that does not diminish their **complexity**, but instead, acknowledges and vitalises it? What sorts of **onto-epistemological outlooks** would be conducive to more caring and capacious power structures? How can we revive the **possibility of sense-making** when radical asymmetries of power, or a breakdown between autonomous systems, have made dialogue all but impossible?

One important feature of **enaction**, as an epistemological, ontological, and ethical approach, is that it radically expands our view of relational dynamics. Instead of limiting ourselves to questions of power over, or even power to, it allows for a serious consideration of the **power *all around and in-between***, locating us in an epistemology that is by definition immersive, inclusive, pluralistic, and sometimes contradictory. In describing enaction,[1] Ezequiel A. Di Paolo offers the metaphor of a 'listening epistemology,' which is in itself a powerful antidote to the ethos of 'power over':

> Listening is the attitude of a present knower in dialogue with what she wishes to understand *and* its context, which makes its own noises. We listen to what's out there and what's in here, but more importantly, to what's *around and in-between*; we engage in order to know and knowing thus becomes a movement of dialectical transformation between what we see, what we feel, what we listen to, the world, our experience, our practice, and an attitude of being participants in knowing.

Knowing in this way becomes a **synergetic engagement** with the world at hand, where domination and objective mastery give way to **participation and attunement** as the primary methods of inquiry. The power does not reside entirely in one party or the other, but in how we relate to and *through* the participatory dynamics between us. In such a dynamic, "knower and known are never finished," as Hanne De Jaegher has put it, which opens up the possibility for sense-making to continue unfolding and evolving.

Yet this is not to say that **asymmetries of power** (structural or otherwise) do not heavily curtail the possibilities for certain types of sense-making to take place. Basil Vassilicos and Marek McGann write in "Qualities of consent: an enactive approach to making better sense" (2023): "Vital to the whole notion of participatory sense-making is that the interactors are in a situation of **mutual influence**, such that they engage in a process of **mutual coordination**."[2] This mutuality both describes an earmark of sense-making and presents something of a challenge, especially in contexts of high polarization. Where mutuality is lacking or absent, interactions are at best fruitless or at worst, harmful. Vassilicos and McGann spell this out with a pointed example: "If one's participation genres are systemically racist (as most are), then one's capacity - for instance as privileged, white, or male with limited social circles - to interact with people of marginalised backgrounds is impoverished, usually in ways to which that person is

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[1] See Di Paolo, E.A., "Enaction and Dialectics, Part I," published on October 6, 2022 in *Dialectical Systems: A Forum for Biology, Ecology and Cognitive Science*. URL: https://www.dialecticalsystems.eu/contributions/enaction-and-dialectics-part-i/.

[2] Vassilicos, B. & McGann, M., "Qualities of consent: an enactive approach to making better sense," in *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 1207–1229 (2023). Citation can be found on p. 1220. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-023-09897-z

oblivious and which place asymmetric demands on others."[3] The working out of such asymmetries is not obvious, and even less obvious are the ways in which this can be resolved on scales of communities and countries.

Considered in this light, one's epistemological and ontological outlooks will always carry within them something of the ethical and the political. How we come to know others and our life-world—and what we think they are to us—will inevitably inform our ways of relating, as well as our tolerance for alterity. Nowhere is this more clearly stated than in Elena Cuffari and George Fourlas' 2022 paper, "Enacting Ought: Ethics, Anti-Racism, and Interactional Possibilities":

> An ethical orientation belongs essentially to the enactive approach to mind and language envisioned and practiced by Maturana, Varela, Thompson, Di Paolo, De Jaegher, and colleagues. It is not an add-on. Understanding enactive ethics is not a matter of applying theories of cognition to circumstances of moral weight. There are no morally neutral circumstances for complex living beings; accordingly, there is no cognitive activity divorced from the always already normative feats of existing as a living thing.[4]

Insofar as enaction is a dialectical, process-oriented, listening epistemology, which engages with the **richness and complexity of direct experience**, one could see it as antithetical to totalizing—and totalitarian—epistemologies, which typically seek to essentialize, dominate, and expunge the richness and diversity of experience. It situates itself as ***tending to* messiness, vulnerability, and difference** (human and more-than-human), rather than systematizing and controlling them. The ethics that follow from such an epistemology are far from arbitrary or neutral. As Hanne De Jaegher and Ezequiel Di Paolo elegantly summarize in their landmark paper "Enactive Ethics: Difference Becoming Participation"[5]: "The art is not to strive for a sameness and stasis that can hide in the collective, i.e., to "merely tolerate" difference (A. Lorde), but to let each other be and become in and through the unerasable fact of difference. Not to let each other go—and not to eliminate difference, but to work with it as the life force that it is." In this we have what could be seen as the beginning of an 'enactive ethics' that speaks directly to the dilemmas of power and care in these times.

In the background to all of this, we have a rich historical tradition that began with our co-founder, Francisco J. Varela, whose **radical departure from the dominant epistemologies of his time** can be considered in tandem with some of the most

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[3] Id., p. 1222.
[4] Fourlas, G.N. & Cuffari, E.C., "Enacting Ought: Ethics, Anti-Racism, and Interactional Possibilities," in *Topoi* 41, 355–371 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-021-09783-w
[5] Di Paolo, E.A. & De Jaegher, H., "Enactive Ethics: Difference Becoming Participation," in *Topoi* 41, 241–256 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-021-09766-x

turbulent political developments of Chile in the 1970s and his subsequent asylum in the U.S. and France. From the **development of the theory of autopoiesis** (1970s) to the **elaboration of the enactive approach** in *The Embodied Mind* (1992/2016), the epistemological arc of Varela's career invites a "reexamination of our self-understanding, our concepts of mind, our moral values, and our social imaginaries around an ethics of co-creation in shaping the world." (Bruce Clarke) In this sense, our work in this lineage can potentially help us in developing an ethical—and indeed, political—stance in the world. Might taking a stance be the starting point from which to engage with *and across* differences in the world? We will have the occasion to explore this more deeply, and related questions, in the 2026 international conference, **"Power and Care: Enactive Approaches and Critical Social Philosophy,"** co-organized with the Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

For our more perennial programming, we have at our disposal a broad constellation of methodologies, starting with foundational approaches such as enaction, neurophenomenology, contemplative science, and contemplative practice, but also including more recent approaches such as Embodied Critical Understanding, participatory sense-making, microphenomeonology, and the PRISMA method. We can also look to kindred approaches that have a rich history of centering questions of power and care, and which likewise emphasize the **primacy of listening**, **processes of emergence**, and the **viability of situated experience**: critical social theory, structuralist and post-structuralist philosophies, process ethics, Buddhist ethics, speculative pragmatism, Indigenous philosophies, Feminist care ethics, capability ethics, neurodiversity studies, and disability studies, to name just a few.

Through these various lenses, we might consider questions such as:

- What can we reasonably expect of the **relationship between power and care** in a world in which profligate **abuses of power** are all but commonplace? Can we conceive of power, itself a **mobile concept**, as a medium through which different forms of care might be made possible?
- How can we develop an ethics of power and care that is **precise and robust**, without being **prescriptive**?
- How would an **'enactive ethics'** (Di Paolo & De Jaegher) deal with the questions of power and care? How does the practice of **moral attunement**, centered in this approach, scale up to large communities and societies?
- How is **care related to embodied normativity**, i.e., the vital norms of autonomous systems? Is there, by extension, an implied normativity in enactive ethics?

- If reciprocality is the earmark of the enactive approach to relationality, how do we deal with **gross asymmetries of power** that make such reciprocality more dangerous for some?
- What does it mean to be **empowered (agentic) as an individual** if our basic condition is to be embedded in a **network of relationality**?
- How can we deal with the issue of **responsibility** if interactions are **emergent** and **dynamic**?
- How has the **privatization of care** in our contemporary world affected social networks and power relations?
- How can we account for the many **blind spots** that complex systems of power seem intent on preserving? Can the blind spots in our very own methodologies reveal certain ways of using (or misusing) power?
- How do **scientific disciplines**, particularly neuroscience, biology, physics, epigenetics, and psychology, conceptualize and address dynamics of power and care?
- Can we consider **contemplative practice** to be a source of empowerment in the world, or a bridge to direct action? How does **analytic meditation**, for example, propose to deal with questions of power and care?
- Is there a place for **"epistemic activism"**[6] (José Medina), in how these approaches critically transform our cognitive-affective attitudes?
- How can we relate to the **urgency** of our present situation, while also opening up to **different temporalities** that might offer saner ways of relating to the power dynamics at hand?
- How can we **empower** ourselves and members of our community, as an **act of caring** for one another?

[6] See especially Medina's latest book: *The Epistemology of Protest: Silencing, Epistemic Activism, and the Communicative Life of Resistance* (Oxford University Press, 2023).