

Alfonsina Scarinzi [ed.]

Meaningful Relations

The Enactivist Making of
Experiential Worlds



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Preface

“The so-called meaning generated through sense making is thus neither a feature of the external environment nor something internal to the agent.”

With these words, Daniel Hutto and Erik Myin describe the notion of sense-making – the enaction of a meaningful world by autonomous systems – in their work *Evolving Enactivism. Basic Minds Meet Content*.¹ In enactive cognitive science, bodily sense-making is the feel of the cognitive-emotional qualitative dimension of an adaptation to environmental factors the organism interacts with and has a participatory character in social interaction. Recent studies in neuroscience and philosophy of mind (Fuchs 2018)² highlight the role of the subjective and intersubjective embodied evaluation of sense-making in experiencing the bodily conditions of meaning constitution in social interaction and in the constitution of shared reality in our sensorimotor engagement with the world. Moreover, they support the view that human experience relies on mind-body-language continuity. Human embodiment involves a special kind of autonomy acquired via incorporation of linguistic habits of sense-making we become sensitive to. We are sensitive to multiple registers and domains of meaning at once when we co-determine and make sense of the environment and of the interaction with the others.

The aim of this volume is to highlight the enactive relation between mind and body, between subjectivity, intersubjectivity and sensorimotor coupling with the environment in the constitution of meaningful relations and meaning from a multidisciplinary point of view. The cognitivist world-mirroring is replaced by a concept of world-making: organisms are motivated to actively look for elements of the environment that are significant for their purposes. Human persons become at one with themselves in their bodily and inter-bodily “being-in-the-world” and “acting-in-the-world.”

The introductory chapter to this volume develops the enactive idea that to make sense of the environment is to understand and interpret it with

1 Hutto, D. & Myin, E. (2017). *Evolving Enactivism. Basic Minds Meet Content*. MIT Press, p. 78.

2 Fuchs, T. (2018). *The Ecology of The Brain*. Oxford University Press.

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different meanings. *Pentti Määttänen* follows Peirce and shows that meaningful relations can be seen as aspects of the activity of organic bodies. He argues that what a thing means is simply what kind of habits it involves. While Määttänen focuses on non-linguistic meaning generation, *Andrea Lombardinilo's* contribution remarks that language is an expressive instrument through which social actors manage to give a form to the mind. He shows that language is a process of social construction founded on sharing meanings. The question of how mind and body relate to each other, of how meaning generation meets embodied cognition and anti-representationalism – two of the main tenets of enactivism – is discussed by *Min Xia*. In her contribution, she takes a closer look at the notion of mental representation and shows that anti-representationalists tend to overstate their arguments by downplaying the role of representation. She proposes a two-dimensional picture of representation to explain human cognition.

The theoretical challenges that Mark Johnson's work about the "embodied" development of cognition represents are the topic of *Ştefan-Sebastian Maftel's* contribution. He discusses the idealist and the Epicurean views on the mind-body problem and shows how these have paved the way for the rise of the embodied approach to meaning generation in cognitive science, which is an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary paradigm. How a cognitive and interdisciplinarily oriented approach to ambiguous meaning can contribute to reducing the range of possible plausible interpretations of a work of literature through the melding of concepts and theoretical frameworks coming from different (sub)disciplines is the topic of *Alfonsina Scarinzi's* chapter, in which Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig* is discussed.

The embodied relation of mind and body in the active engagement with the environment or with a cognitive field is explored in the contribution by *Andrea Schiavio* and *Michael Kimmel*. They focus on creativity. They highlight the power of situated, transactional meaning-making and its underlying dynamics to better examine infants engaging in their first musical discoveries, adult expert improvisers, and collective forms of learning. The plurality of worlds in making sense of the world is the topic of the contribution by *Mariselda Tassarolo*. She shows how sociology contributed to developing the view that a single mode for the correct construction of reality does not exist. The world does not necessarily require knowledge to be completely compliant, she argues. Human beings as embodied sense-giving actors determine meanings of events, objects or states in terms of their experiential effects. This highlights *Nil Avci*. She analyzes James's conception of meaning and sense-making. She claims that every experience of a presence is an experience of absence which makes itself aesthetically felt as

a harmonious or discordant “more” or “yet to come.” As a consequence, the aesthetic dimension of experience refers to its never consumable and unifiable character; to its felt incompleteness. The process of communicating through art to share a community of feeling and of experienced meaning is discussed in *Ana Matoso’s* work. She focuses on intersubjective meaning constitution and discusses Tolstoy’s *What is Art?* She shows how Tolstoy launches an unprecedented attack on Romantic theories about art, which allegedly only served to isolate the artist from his or her audience. The view that art should be dislodged from its pedestal and reclaimed as one of the most important means of creating meaning in our communal lives is discussed. Sharing meaning intersubjectively requires mutual understanding. While *Alessandra Sciutti* and *Giulio Sandini* discuss this basis of human communication and how it contributes to developing a roadmap toward cognitive systems by illustrating the use of the humanoid iCub robot, *Francesco Parisi* shows how sense-making processes can be enlarged by the presence of a tool and how the effect can involve different sensorial channels as well as the whole phenomenal experience of the subject. His contribution focuses on the view that meaning is distributed over body and environment. It is socially and culturally situated. *Jessica Lindblom* introduces the idea that all so-called higher cognitive functions “presuppose the human being’s enactment of life in a shared social world”. These socially and culturally situated, bodily, interactive and intersubjective experiences form the foundation for acquiring and internalizing the dispositions of the interactional patterns, social understanding, cultural symbol systems, language, qualities, and art in human society. She addresses the situated, sense-making, enactive, and embodied nature of the artful mind and reformulates Merlin Donald’s seven governing cognitive principles for art. *Ilaria Riccioni’s* contribution focuses on the continuity between the arts and society which repositioned the arts within their social context as active social actor influencing and dialoguing with social needs, social conflicts, social injustice, and the social perception of belonging. Her main claim is that the senses can shape form through the arts, and in the ambiguity of their signs rests the balance of life and human beings’ search for meaning. Last but not least, *Alfonsina Scarinzi* shows that enactive sense-making can be integrated into a notion of post-cognitivist mind. This manifests itself in the ecological and enactive view that the surroundings are meaningful in an embodied, non-semantic, non-representational sense: the idea of sense-making in enactivism shows that the world is meaningful inasmuch as it allows the organism to perform certain action, which is something similar to the idea of affordance in ecological psychology, also called “the meaning of things for action.”

Preface

This collection of works puts together the contributions presented on the 29th and the 30th of August 2019 at the 3rd meeting on “Aesthetics and the Embodied Mind”, which took place in Göttingen (Germany), and the development of the enactive topics presented at the Workshop “Enacting Meaningful Worlds: Perspectives and Methods” in 2020 and in 2021 at CY AS Institute for Advanced Studies, Cergy Paris Université (France).

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Alfonsina Scarinzi

Göttingen (Germany) and Neuville-sur-Oise (France),
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