4E Cognition and Practical Ethical Implications

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1 Introduction

4E Cognition refers to a group of frameworks that propose an embodied, embedded, enacted and extended approach to cognition, in contrast with computational or brain-focused perspectives. Here I would like to explore questions of morality and ethics from the perspective of some such frameworks.

In particular we will look at Varela (1999)'s exploration of ethics inspired by eastern traditions and on his own and Maturana's framework of autopoietic organisations (Maturana and Varela, 1987). We then look at Fuchs (2020)'s idea of relational values which gives us an insight into how might overarching values arise in a society where people are interconnected. Moreover, Urban (2014) points us towards a potential source of inspiration in works of Care Ethics, specifically Held et al. (2006) where we find overlapping conceptions of person as a relational being rather than the dominant individualistic view, and we try to draw from their developments in the field of ethics to our help.

2 Ethical Know-How

Maturana and Varela (1987) sets out a framework of cognition, which distinguishes *living beings* by their autopoiesis (continuous self-production), and considers cognition as a property of such autopoietic organisations. They stress structural couplings among autopoietic systems, as well as a congruent drift of living beings together with their environment. Their framework is very much aligned with enaction, and in Noë et al. (2004)'s words, a main point of enaction is that "experience is not something that happens to our brains; instead, it is something we do, typically by moving our bodies around our physical and cultural environments"

In such a framework, an important point that arises is that "Every act of knowing brings forth a world" (Maturana and Varela, 1987). There follows a rejection of an objective, shared world between us, which is in line with most enactivist frameworks proposing the idea that each individual living being brings

forth their own world through their interaction with their environment. (Käufer and Chemero, 2015) (Froese and Di Paolo, 2011) (De Jaegher and Rohde, 2010) This view entails a relative approach to questions of morality, since there is no objective world, there cannot be an absolute moral framework.

Varela (1999) is an exploration in the realm of ethics through the enactive perspective of the autopoiesis framework set out by Maturana and Varela (1987) by one if its own original authors. It draws inspiration from eastern traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, along with theories of enactive cognition to come up with an alternative to what he calls the a "rational, deliberate and intentional" view of ethics. He proposes that the current conventional view of the Western scientific community of ethics as a deliberate, intentional act of analysis, based on *reasoning* follows from the historical context of Western philosophy. To support this assertion, he points to views of influential writers and philosophers such as MacIntyre (2013):

> In practical reasoning the possession of this virtue is not manifested so much in the knowledge of a set of generalizations or maxims which may provide our practical inferences with major premises; its presence or absence rather appears in the kind of capacity for judgement which the agent possesses in knowing how to select among the relevant stack of maxims and how to apply them in particular situations.

Similarly, we find Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative standard of rationality to be characterised as an objective and rational principle that must always be followed (Johnson and Cureton, 2021), and it is evident by the first formulation of the Categorical Imperative:

> Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law. (Kant and Schneewind, 2002)

However, Varela (1999) suggests that most of what we do on a daily basis is of a different category; that of skilled, automatic and transparent actions: eating, moving, talking, seeing are all done without our deliberate thinking and analysis because we are skilled at them. The idea is to extend our perspective to think of our moral behaviour as being of this kind. After all, we are trained for our communities and society to act upon a certain implicit moral framework, and we automatically apply our skills without diligent thought most of the time; this is what he calls ethical know-how. An example from Confucianism, by Mencius draws a picture of this case:

> Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child. (Meng et al., 2003)

Moreover, the next pillar of the ethical framework proposed by (Varela, 1999), is to understand that what we call *self*, is indeed a virtual self that *emerges* out of the complex system that is us as individuals. To see this more clearly, consider insect colonies which have emergent properties that cannot be found in any individual member of the colony, but rather are only a property of the whole. Similarly, our sense of *self* is merely an emergent property of us and our interaction with our communities as a whole.

Once we realise that there is no self without others, once we become selfless, Varela (1999) declares, there arises a warmth and inclusiveness which leads us to be less self-interested, and be a compassionate part of the whole. Following these two pillars, he postulates his main proposition:

> Ethical know-how is the progressive, firsthand acquaintance with the virtuality of self.

3 Relational Values

Fuchs (2020) paints a similar picture by first drawing attention to the four axes of ethical frameworks, on one hand the realist and subjectivist axis, and on the other the naturalistic and cultural axis. In a subjective account, it is supposed that each subject projects their moral values into an otherwise neutral, objective world of no or negligible significance for these values. On the other end of the spectrum, a realist view supposes moral values to be fixed rules that have to be found and followed universally. Along the other axis, a naturalistic view thinks of moral values as determined by our biological needs and evolutionary forces alone, in which our moral behaviour is thought to be directed towards our self-preservation and passing of and protection of our lineages; while in a cultural view each group or society is the significant determinate of moral values.

He proposes that from an enactive perspective, ethical values can only be *relational*, so that they only exist in the relation between a subject and other subjects and its environment. In this sense, it is neither purely subjectivist, nor realist; neither purely naturalistic nor cultural, but it sits on an origin point at the crosspoint of the axes.

He suggests that the realization of higher-level, shared ethical values in human societies is still bound to each individual's capacity for perception. Such second-order values emerge out of first-order values of individuals, shared through their socialization, mutual recognition and a necessary inhibition of one's own desires in favour of interpersonal *overarching values*. Such second-order values arise as we realise that our freedom and success depends on such shared values. If each individual was to define their own moral values and perfectly abide by it, we would not yet have freedom or peace since they are inherently interpersonal. (Fuchs, 2020) As a result, a main point for us to take here is that overarching moral values arise as a property of the whole, and while they are nowhere to be found in any individual, they arise from the group and the values are dependent on how the group and its members perceive morality.

4   Practical Implications: First Look

The question remains about practical moral obligations in such a view, and in this regard Varela (1999) proposes that in order for us to integrate this view into our culture, we should not try to set out to define norms or rationalistic orders, but rather we should encourage disciplines moving away from ego-centered habits and towards a more compassionate, selfless understanding. He acknowledges, however, that normative rules are necessary in our shared societies, but they should be informed by wisdom. Instead of instilling specific moral habits, we need to move towards a point where there are no *habits*, but rather we are skilled enough for wisdom and compassion to arise directly in every situation.

However, although Varela suggests that it is a necessity to have normative rules, it is unclear how are we to derive such rules so that they are "informed by wisdom". It is also difficult to imagine normative rules that would not inevitably become habits.

Urban (2014) touches on the same lack of clear and mature understanding of practical implications of enactive accounts on ethics, and inspired by Cash (2013) points us towards relational views of autonomy and self that have been around and used by feminist theorists as a potential reference point. He argues that these ideas have been around before enactive theories, yet they are applicable in the domain of ethics to the ideas of enaction and can be used to avoid a reinvention of ideas since these ideas criticise the individualistic conceptions of self, agency and moral autonomy and as a result are aligned with the enactive point of view.

5   Care Ethics

The idea of care ethics has been around before enactive views, and it shares with enactive accounts a focus on the relations between humans rather than an individualistic, rational and independent view. (Held et al., 2006) Given this shared perspective, the ideas can be used as inspiration by enactivists to avoid reinventing the wheel from scratch.

Held et al. (2006) points five main characteristics of care ethics which we will briefly explore here.

First, care ethics appreciates the dependence of human beings on each other, it recognises that humans cannot live without depending on others, human children cannot be raised without an adult to depend on, which points to a fundamental need and presence of dependence and care between humans. (Held et al., 2006) This is in line with ideas of 4E cognition since from this perspective, the interdependency of all beings on each other is of the essence.

Second, care ethics values emotions rather than rejecting them, as sometimes it is by rational accounts of ethics. Emotions can be helpful in easing the process of us understanding what is moral and what is not, and as such, specifically emotions such as sympathy, responsiveness, sensitivity and empathy are to be cultivated rather than abandoned. Even anger can be useful at times to help us

understand what do we consider to be unjust or inhuman. (Held et al., 2006) This is similarly in-line with enaction, as feelings are thought to be part of us as a whole, and there is no dichotomy between the "head" being rational and the "body" feeling. (Colombetti and Thompson, 2008)

Third, the dominant view that moral theories must be as abstract as possible to avoid bias and arbitrariness are rejected by care ethics, since such abstract views of morality pose an absolute view and remove the subjects from their context. In certain contexts, some actions can be moral even if they go against a moral requirement that can be universalised. (Held et al., 2006) I also think this is aligned with enactivist accounts as the context and actual relationships are the priority from such a view.

Fourth, similar to some feminist thoughts, care ethics tries to reconstruct the traditional notions of public and private, where the household is private and government cannot intrude without consent, whereas the rest are public and open to the politic sphere. (Held et al., 2006) This idea is tricky to incorporate directly into enactivism, since enaction is not directly addressing questions of politics and authority (which we might say is a missing point). As a result, we can consider this point as something that might be adopted by enactive accounts of ethics, or not.

Fifth, and most important for us, is the conception of person in care ethics, which is thought of as a "relational, rather than as the self-sufficient independent individuals of the dominant moral theories". (Held et al., 2006) This is the main point of overlap between enaction and care ethics, which helps us consider this ethical framework as a viable option for inspiration.

In this view, the relations between humans is not thought of as contractual, and moral behaviour is not thought to be either completely selfish, or purely for the "sake of humanity", but rather our moral behaviour is thought to lie somewhere in between these extremes. When a parent cares for their child, they do not do this for themselves, neither are they thinking of humanity as a whole. (Held et al., 2006)

6   Justice & Care

An important distinction is made by Held et al. (2006) between systems of justice and the domain of ethics of care. Justice focuses on questions of fairness, equality and individual rights based on abstract principles to which people have agreed, and this in return requires free, equal and autonomous individuals choosing to agree and be treated as such in this framework. Care on the other hand is more concerned with attentiveness, trust, responsiveness to need and cultivating caring relations.

Some theorists such as Nel Noddings proposed that justice be replaced by care as the central concept of morality, which entails that care should provide all the necessary directions for any moral issues we face; however this view has been open to many objections. It seems out of reach for care to deal with criminal coercion, violent conflict between states and such, meanwhile justice seems to

be more well-suited for dealing with such issues. (Held et al., 2006)

It appears that there is need for an integration of justice and care ethics in order to reach a balanced framework where issues of interpersonal conflicts, equality and fairness, as well as context-aware, relational issues of caring, responsiveness and dependence of humans can be addressed.

On this subject, Held et al. (2006) suggests that care should be the wider moral framework within which justice can be sought, with the reasoning that care seems to be a most basic moral value, it is essential to humans and without care we would not be humans as we are. Held argues that even though justice is indeed a very important aspect of our society at the moment, some parts of our lives such as family life have gone on without the application of justice as such for a long time and it has been moderately good.

My understanding of this idea is that we ought to first set the general ethical framework as one that emphasises the relations between people and the context, educating and cultivating caring relations between people, and only then, we seek to implement ideas of justice, fairness and resolution for interpersonal conflicts within this framework. Since we currently live in a society that is dominantly justice-first from an authority's point of view, it may be hard for us to imagine what difference it makes to have this caring framework in place and seek justice within it, rather than seeking care in our justice-oriented system.

7   Practical Implications: An Integrated View

Here I will attempt to integrate the ideas discussed so far into a more coherent view that uses the different pieces to give us a better idea of what a moral framework based on 4E Cognition might mean for us.

A point shared by all the theories discussed so far is the focus on relations between subjects, rather than their individuality. From the perspective of Relational Values, overarching principles and moral values arise only as a property of the whole and we cannot find their origin in any individual; similarly Varela suggests that we need to understand the virtuality of "self" and look at ourselves as parts of a larger whole, and this is aligned with Held's focus on the caring relations between people rather than each individual. It follows that to put these ideas into practice, we need a common understanding of this idea of selflesness and our part in a whole to replace our ego-centric views of self.This is a huge, and controversial cultural change, at least in Western societies, albeit it might be slightly less controversial in other cultures which already adopt this mindset. This might come around by incorporating these ideas into education as an alternative view.

However, even if some cultures around the world may adopt this mindset, the justice system seems to be very similar in the majority of countries in the sense that in such a system, individuals are still treated as independent, rational and autonomous agents that can decide for themselves and have full responsibility of their actions. This seems to be the largest gap in the current theories of morality from a 4E perspective, since an alternative is hard to come by. If we

look at all humans in relation to each other, it follows that the judge and jury themselves are in a tight coupling with the people being "judged", as such there seems no escape from such coupling. Held suggested that we take this part to remain as it is, but with the same mindset of giving priority to relations and context and less of an individualistic view. So it appears that albeit we are unsure what will happen if we adopt a selfless mindset, we expect it to have an impact on how judgements may be made, although this part is implicit rather than explicit in current theories.

Human rights are one of the most important concepts in our modern societies as well, but they also fall into the same line of a heavily individual-centred view that sets boundaries between individuals and tries to force such boundaries and resolve conflicts arising from any breach of such rights between individuals. We may say that albeit such rights serve to protect individuals, they may not be the core principle we want to build our moral frameworks on, since they cannot answer all the questions on themselves, given their limited scope to individuals. As a simple example, consider a child seeing an open garden door and walking through it, in such a case the child is breaching the privacy of the house owner, and the parents of the child may want to walk in through the same gates to guide the child outside: in this case the parents are also, knowingly, breaching the privacy rights of the house owner; however we may agree that the parents are doing the appropriate thing. This is because we are not merely looking at each individual's rights in this scenario, as resolving the conflict of rights may be utterly difficult in an abstract sense here, but looking at the relations and the overall context of what happened, we may arrive at an agreeable resolution.

8   Conclusion

We need more emphasis on a common understanding of people about our beings as part of a whole, rather than a self-centred view, for us to be able to have a moral framework that can answer questions about our relations. We may need to integrate ideas of justice and individual rights into such a system in a way that respects the relations and context between people, while maintaining some sense of agency for each individual, and this is not an easy task and there remain questions to be answered.

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