

An Adventure in Ethics: The Virtue of the Virtual Self, Shaun Gallagher's presentation , March 14, 2024. The 2024 Martineau Lecture. Hosted by the University of Tasmania.

Abstract:

In a series of lectures on Ethical Know-How, Francisco Varela explains that he is venturing 'into the territory of ethical thought ... Ethics is a new terrain for me, and what I have to say here must be taken in the sphere of adventure more than anything else'. On this adventure Varela is very much influenced by Hubert Dreyfus and his analysis of expertise. Similar to the way that Dreyfus attempts to formulate an ethical theory derived from his analysis of expertise, Varela attempts to do this based on his enactive principles. I'll argue that, despite being inspired by Dreyfus' account of expert practice and embodied coping, and retaining the term 'ethical expertise, Varela offered important correctives to the specific limitations that can be found in Dreyfus's view. I'll also argue that we can resolve some tensions in Varela's account, and extend it to include a skillful form of deliberation that can play an important role in setting up environments or even rules of society, which through the enactive reciprocity of relations between agentive organism and environment, can facilitate our actions and make us who we are.

I'm going to talk about ethics somewhat, which is not exactly my main field of inquiry, but I was very much influenced by a neuroscientist named Francisco Varela, who I got to know for about five years before he passed away at an early age , and I thought he was something of a genius in terms of his neuroscience, and he was very much influenced himself by phenomenology , so a bit of this has to do with phenomenology. And I'll try to say a little bit about what that means, as well as ethics. So that's sort of my route into ethics , or at least for this talk, and the word adventure actually comes from him. This is something that he said in a book entitled Ethical Know-How that he published in 1999. He says that he is venturing into the territory of ethical thought. Ethics, he says, "is a new terrain for me and what I have to say here must be taken in the sphere of adventure more than anything else", so I'm taking the title here from what he has to say at the very beginning of his very short book on ethics. so here is an outline. I'll try to work my way through these four parts. I will talk first of all about the notion of ethical expertise , and that idea goes back to the work of Hubert Dreyfus, and I'll note Hubert Dreyfus had some influence on the work of Francisco Varela. then I'll take a look at how Varela takes things a little bit beyond what Dreyfus was doing, and specifically one critique of Dreyfus is that he doesn't really have a concept of the good, which seems somewhat essential for ethics. And that at least when it comes to Varela, he does introduce the notion of the good. I will finish up, then , talking about a concept that goes back to Aristotle, the notion of phronesis, or practical wisdom , and try to work out what phronesis is from the perspective of enactive, embodied enactive cognition which is the area that Francisco Varela was working in .

So in the 1980s, I think maybe 1970s, Dreyfus had developed a critique of artificial intelligence, and he became quite well-known for that from a perspective of embodied phenomenology. so he has that kind of famous critique. He wrote a book called What Computers Can't Do , which may be somewhat outdated today given what we have today with artificial intelligence and how it's working everywhere , and really infiltrating our lives. In any case, Dreyfus was also well known

for a theory about expertise , the question being , what is it that makes for an expert. we'll talk a little bit about that. so , what Varela learns from Dreyfus , he reads and meets and discusses things with Dreyfus. And what he learns from Dreyfus is first of all is that critique of computational cognitivism that is behind artificial intelligence , and he also learns a bit from the work on expertise and know-how. He also takes up a kind of critical perspective on the work of Edmond Husserl, who was the father of phenomenology. so Dreyfus was always critical of Husserl's work, and Francisco follows along that line in his early work until the 1990s , when he in a certain way , gets converted to thinking that Husserl in fact has something important to say. So this is something that he changed his mind on. But when he was writing his major works Varela was very much influenced by Dreyfus, Heidegger Merleau-Ponty, not so much by Husserl. so there's a number of things that Francisco Varela takes from Hubert Dreyfus, and some of these things are very relevant to what we'll talk about today. Similar to the way that Dreyfus attempts to formulate an ethical theory out of his analysis of expertise, and he ends up talking about ethical expertise , Varela attempts to do this also with reference to his enactive principles, principles of embodied cognition, and we'll see that this could be problematic in fact, that there is something of a problem to be resolved at least if you try to base an ethics on enactive phenomenology.

I'm going to argue that despite being inspired by Dreyfus and specifically Dreyfus's account of expert practice and embodied coping, and despite retaining Dreyfus term ethical expertise, Varela offered important correctives to specific limitations that you can find in Dreyfus's view . some of you might be familiar with Dreyfus's analysis of expertise. It's a quite well known one, at least in philosophy , and basically the idea is if you look at the yellow curve, the idea is to try to explain the difference between starting out as a novice, and then going through a set of steps to to ultimately get to the level of the expert. What the yellow is telling us is that when we first start out, we are very much dependent upon following a set of rules , a set of instructions, perhaps, to how to do certain things. And the rule-governed behavior that characterizes the novice starts to change as the person practices the area of expertise that they are aiming for , and after a good amount of practice and more practice and more practice , becoming more competent, becoming more proficient, you see the curve goes down . The claim is that the expert doesn't really follow rules any more according to Dreyfus . rather the other curves tells us that there is a kind of increase of intuitive know-how ,so that the the expert has, in fact, an intuitive grasp of what to do.

The expert can simply look at the situation and say, oh this is what we need to do. The expert doesn't have to go to his books or review what the various steps might be , or think about it very much at all. the expert simply can see what needs to be done and will be able to do it according to Dreyfus. so we're really moving from a kind of rule governed behavior, which, which in fact involves a kind of reflection , to a kind of non-reflective or pre-reflective ability that has simply to see and to understand what one needs to do. so this is the very basic skeletal view of Dreyfus's considerations about expertise of what makes for an expert. so Dreyfus conceives also of the virtuous person as something like an ethical expert. The expert, in this case, the virtuous person , is someone who knows what to do intuitively without thinking, and without having to follow rules. expert performance and virtuous action involve a highly proficient bodily coping, the result of practice. the virtuous person simply knows what the right thing to do is , and goes and does it,

acts out of that intuitive insight. And so he sometimes describes this both with respect to the notion of expertise and with respect to the virtuous person, that the person is in the flow in such a way that you could describe it as a kind of mindless activity. mindless at least in the sense that there's not a lot of thinking going on. There's just a lot of doing, a lot of doing that's guided by a kind of intuitive sense of what to do. So being mindlessly in the flow is a characterization for Dreyfus of the expert, and Dreyfus himself thinks that this is modeled on a kind of Aristotelian notion of phronesis, practical wisdom, and there are in fact, when you go to take a look at Aristotle's Nicomachean ethics, for example, there are some descriptions of phronesis where it's very like this, it's when a person has phronesis, this virtue of practical wisdom, that person simply knows what to do, just has a sense of what to do and does the right thing. There is at least some features of phronesis that seem to reflect that kind of intuitive sense, and this is exactly the feature that Dreyfus picks up on.

There are, however, I think some problems with Dreyfus's notion of phronesis, at least from the perspective of an Aristotelian concept. so one problem I think in his account of phronesis is on the side of this mindless type of behavior. That it's just an intuitive sense within practice. But there's something more going on in Aristotle's account of phronesis, and that is that Aristotle also talks about deliberation, that the person with phronesis is also the kind of person that's capable of deliberating about what is good and what is bad, what one ought to do and what one ought not to do. and so deliberation is a kind of reflective movement. it's precisely that kind of reflective movement that Dreyfus suggests interrupts practice and interrupts expertise. the expert doesn't use reflection anymore, and when you start reflecting and thinking it kind of gets in the way, according to Dreyfus, and he doesn't like the Aristotelian idea of deliberation here. so in talking about phronesis he really just emphasizes the more intuitive aspect of it and leaves aside the whole conception that, well, it could involve some deliberation. also, if you ask Aristotle, how do you get phronesis? Where does phronesis come from? How does one pick up practical wisdom? Do you study it at school by taking an ethics course? No, the idea for Aristotle primarily is that, well, you hang around with good people, people who are doing good things, and you learn by example, and you, you do the kinds of things that good people do and therefore you become good. you gain your phronesis, you gain your practical wisdom simply by hanging around with the right kind of people. so probably all of your parents were Aristotelian in this regard, saying, you know, you better hang around with the right kind of people, otherwise you could go wrong. and that's pretty much the point.

But here what I want to emphasize is the idea that phronesis really depends upon social interaction and that if you don't have an account of social interaction, then you're not really giving us a full account of something like phronesis. and that's part of the problem with Dreyfus's account. He doesn't really give us an account of social interaction. He talks about apprenticeship when it comes to learning and becoming proficient and becoming an expert, you start out as an apprentice, which seems to imply that there is at least a teacher there, but in fact when it comes to actually saying how that works, he doesn't really give us a story. So in terms of Dreyfus's work on expertise, there's something missing there that I think transitions into this problem with phronesis. OK, going back, the third problem, and I learned this from being on a panel with Dreyfus at some point in Norway in Oslo, where he was in fact talking to a group of Olympic athletic coaches and he was explaining his concept of expertise but when we got into a

discussion about phronesis, because he was using that term at the time, he seemed not to recognize a distinction that Aristotle makes between phronesis and cleverness. cleverness is something very much like phronesis, Aristotle says, except phronesis has an extra ingredient in it. Phronesis involves knowing what the good is and cleverness doesn't necessarily involve that, so you can be a very clever criminal or a very clever terrorist, but you would not necessarily have phronesis. Dreyfus seemed simply not to recognize that distinction, and that's why I think when he talks about ethical expertise it's somewhat problematic. Because what seems to be missing is some sort of conception of the good, or even an acknowledgment that there is a thing here that we have to worry about, and that is, what the good is. so it seems like his phronesis is without a conception of the Good. so those are three specific problems that I think are things to worry about in his account. And I think that these problems do get incorporated into his concept of ethical expertise. So first emphasizing practice, habit and intuitive coping, ethical expertise leaves little or no room for reflective deliberation, which is thought to disrupt practice. So he is very much embodied, very much focused on action and our ability to act in a smooth coping fashion. Once reflection starts to move into it, it kind of disrupts that smooth flow, and in that case, deliberation is not something he wants to consider.

Second, Dreyfus's account of expertise, including ethical expertise, fails to explain how it develops under the influence of others. It's not something that he denies. He doesn't say, oh this doesn't involve other people, but he never gives any kind of adequate analysis of what that means or how that works. And third, ethical expertise remains a kind of technical know-how, which could be simply a form of cleverness, without an explanation of how one comes to know the good. So those problems with phronesis, I believe, turn out to be problems with his notion of ethical expertise. Now, Varela keeps the term ethical expertise, and he also is concerned about the notion of know-how, but Varela's analysis I think indicates how all three of these deficiencies that I pointed to might be corrected. So first of all, although Varela still maintains his distance from the notion of rational reflective deliberation, he does explain how ethical practice is a mindful practice rather than anything like a mindless coping, so mindfulness comes into play in an analysis, and we'll see how that works. he also emphasizes the importance of the intersubjective. He doesn't say enough about it, but he says a sufficient amount to show that in fact, it turns out to be an important consideration when we're thinking about ethics, which should make sense to us. and finally he provides a concept of the good. In this case, he returns to Buddhist practices to find a conception of the good that he brings into his ethical considerations. So his little book, *Ethical Know-how*, is organized into three lectures he collected into a small book. In the first lecture, he makes contrast between the overly rationalistic Cognitivist approaches to questions of ethics, those types of approaches that emphasize rational reflective judgment, and specifically understood as a form of knowing that. So there's a pretty classic distinction between knowing that and knowing how in the philosophical literature.

Gilbert Ryle is famous for making this distinction, but the distinction goes back to John Dewey and probably a number of other people. Knowing that is a form of propositional knowledge; it's a knowledge about facts, and if you have enough knowledge of facts, then you might start to be considered something like an expert, and there are theories of expertise that go in that direction. Dreyfus's notion is that it's based on know-how, that it's about embodied practice and being able to recognize in a situation what needs to be done that doesn't take the form of propositional

knowledge. So in this respect, he is following Dreyfus again. He's moving away from reflective deliberation, thinking about that in terms of a form of knowing-that rather than know-how. He's thinking here of, and he mentions, Kant, Habermas, Rawls, we could also add something like the utilitarian calculus, where we have to deliberate. Kant, you know, talks about a kind of internal struggle where we have to sort out what we ought to do and so forth. Habermas talks about a discourse ethics where we really have to talk and reflect, have critical reflection on what we're doing and so forth and so on. Even Aristotelian deliberation is something that Varela questions in regard to his reading of Alistair McIntyre on Aristotle's Nicomachean ethics. In contrast to this type of approach, he favors a more embodied enactive account of ethical expertise as a form of skilled behavior that would be closer to our everyday type of action, and again closer to what Dreyfus would characterize as an intuitive coping. And here he explicitly aligns himself with Hegel, but especially with the phenomenologists such as Heidegger, Charles Taylor, and Hubert Dreyfus.

In mentioning McIntyre, he places his considerations in the framework of Aristotelian virtue theory, where he writes about McIntyre's book entitled *After Virtue*. He says in *After Virtue*, McIntyre concludes from a reading of Aristotle's *Nicomachean ethics* that the moral agent is best described as a competent performer deliberately choosing among Maxims, and he quotes McIntyre here. In practical reasoning, the possession of an adequate sense of the tradition to which one belongs appears in the kind of capacity for judgment which the agent possesses in knowing how to select the relevant stack of maxims and how to apply them in a particular situation. For Varela this seems to involve too much reflection, seems to be still too cognitivist, too much deliberation, choosing maxims and things like that. Varela favors a more embodied account and he appeals to enactive principles cast in terms of the strong connection between action and perception. So he argues for a non-representationalist type of sensory motor contingencies, a very embodied enactive approach to cognition. Rational deliberation may come to the foreground when things go wrong, he would say, or when there might be disruptions in the smooth coping that we are engaged in, but typically our lives are characterized as a kind of readiness for action. This is a Heideggerian notion of action orientation and again very much in line with Dreyfus and he cites Dreyfus and Dewey quite a bit here. Dreyfus, in any case. Dewey he cites only once. And he takes this to be a kind of know-how rather than knowing that. So here is what Dewey says. We may be said to know how, by means of our habits, we walk and read aloud, we get off and on street cars, we dress and undress, and do a thousand useful acts without thinking of them. We know something, namely, how to do them.

If we choose to call this knowledge, then other things also called knowledge, knowledge of and about things, knowledge that things are thus and so, knowledge that involves reflection and conscious appreciation, that remains a different sort of thing according to Dewey. So there's that distinction between knowing how and knowing that, and again Dewey is sort of a proponent of know-how over knowing that, and Francisco Varela is following that. I just want to make a note here that Varela didn't really do a lot of reading of Dewey so he's learning his Dewey through Dreyfus, and this precise quote was a quotation that Dreyfus had made several years earlier so Varela just sort of borrows that and puts it here, without I think anything like a full study of Dewey or the pragmatists. All of this seems to go along very well with Dreyfus's thinking, but even at the very opening of his lectures Varela offers I think a corrective to Dreyfus. He says

ethics is closer to wisdom than to reason, closer to understanding what is good than to correctly adjudicating particular situations. Although he associates the notion of adjudicating with the focus of judgment and overly rationalistic approaches, the point is that even in knowing how there must be some consideration of what makes for a good life, and a notion of the good as the object of our love or allegiance. So here he is explicitly introducing something again that Dreyfus doesn't seem to go into and that is, what exactly do we mean by the good? what is the good life and what does it mean to act in a good way?

It in this respect, to incorporate a kind of mindful wisdom and a notion of the good, that Varela, in order to develop this, turns to what he calls three wisdom traditions of the east: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. so we can see this as an attempt to integrate the notion of embodied coping as an intuitive or spontaneous know-how, which can be understood in terms of enactive sensory motor coupling, that would be Francisco's type of terminology, with a concern for the Good, an account of which is missing in Dreyfus. And Varela says, as a first approximation, let me say that a wise or virtuous person is one who knows what is good, and spontaneously does it. That spontaneity would fit very closely with Dreyfus, but the idea that we have to know what the Good is in order to do it is something there's no account of in Dreyfus. Here's a critical question however, this is a question that was raised by one of my colleagues, Dan Hutto in his Frege lectures last year, and the question is whether enactivism has within itself the resources to ground an ethics. He criticizes a number of recent enactivist proposals by people like Ezekiel DiPaolo, Hanne de Jaegher, Kathari, Michelle Mace and others specifically on this count. Their approaches basically give us something I think very similar to Dreyfus's account of know-how and then claim that there is an ethics in that mix somehow. but according to Hutto that's a problem. On Hutto's view, enactivism, and specifically its account of sense making, is an attempt to explain or give a descriptive account of how cognitive agents operate, but it doesn't say anything about how they ought to operate. So a descriptive account of course is different from a prescriptive one and the question is how one gets anything like strong normative conceptions into a description of how action happens. To say they ought to operate in a certain way or to offer ethical guidance, one needs to appeal to resources outside of enactivism.

Enactivism within itself doesn't really give us an answer to questions about ethical doings. I think this critique could easily extend to Dreyfus and perhaps even to Dewey. It's debatable; there has been in fact some debate about that. But I want to suggest that it does not include Varela, since he recognizes the need to look to various ethical traditions to find a conception of the good that he thinks is important to have. So we could say that what Varela is offering is not an enactivist ethics or even an ethics that is based upon enactivism, but it is an ethics that is, let's say, consistent with enactivism and I guess we could say it could be equally consistent with other theories. It could be in fact, consistent with cognitivist theories of cognition, so one way to think about that is even if the ought cannot be derived from the is, the is may be able to constrain the ought in some way. So we could ask something like what's better, Kantian internal cognitive struggle which involves heavy deliberation, or quick practice-informed enactive intuitive insight. Which is a better way to go for an ethical theory? And of course what we could then have is a big debate about which way to go. But what I'm suggesting is that whichever way you go would in some way constrain the type of thing you would be able to say with respect to ethics. So Varela's second lecture turns to the notion of wisdom by turning to non-Western traditions,

Taoism as I said , Confucianism, and Buddhism, and here there are two points made as an implicit correction to Dreyfus's notion of phronesis .first, although it's not a return to the traditional emphasis on rational deliberation,

Varela does emphasize a form of mindful wisdom that provides some conception of the good, and second, he does give us something unfortunately underdeveloped, but nonetheless an acknowledgment of the importance of intersubjective social life. Here is what he says about the intersubjective. He says "we acquire our ethical behavior in much the same way we acquire all other modes of behavior. They become transparent to us as we grow up in society, and this is because learning is as we know, circular. we learn what we are supposed to be in order to be accepted as learners , this socialization process has roots too profound for an analysis here in these short lectures. Still, he says it is clear that an ethical expert is nothing more or less than a full participant in a community. We are all experts because we all belong to a fully textured tradition in which we move at ease.

So I think he sees the importance of intersubjective and social without developing in any large way how that ultimately works. Without developing this part of the analysis it's clear that it provides the motivation and framework for ethical behavior. Not only is ethical practice a skill behavior, but it is always directed at others. Part of our skill behavior is responding to the needs of others and if that is so, then it should also be clear that the situations in which we exercise ethical expertise far out number those in which we must exercise explicit ethical deliberation. So again he is really siding in a certain Dreyfus-like way with our ability to insightfully intuit what we need to do in a situation, but at the same time moving a little bit away from ethical deliberation, but nonetheless we're talking about responding to the needs of others and that's sort of the important point in this regard. And we'll see that this really helps to answer the question about the good. So one Confucian thinker, Mencius, is discussed by Varela and he starts with Mencius. He thinks that Mencius has a conception of the good as a kind of natural disposition and it's something that we need to develop through a kind of cultivation. So he sees that as an important way to conceive of how virtue starts to develop. Varela says the wise man is ethical, or more explicitly, his actions arise from inclinations that his disposition produces in response to specific situations. If you look then, and in fact, he looks in some detail at Mencius's work, wisdom for Mencius is constituted by mindful practices which he identifies three. First, he talks about attention, kind of mindfulness in action, attending not just to the situation, but to my own natural disposition, although in a way that is not self-based or selfish. This is in contrast to actions that arise from, for example, a desire for gain or from anything like an automatic response pattern or also from simply following rules. A second component of this mindful practice is what Mencius calls extension, which is a method of gaining insight into a particular case by means of analogy. and this involves a kind of skill transfer, so this is in fact a discussion that happens also in discussions of expertise about how skills transfer from one domain to another, but it also pertains to ethics in the sense that we want to pay attention to differences from one case to another. The particularity of cases is something that for example Aristotelian ethics does highlight, and the third part of this mindfulness idea is intelligent awareness in contrast to automatic response. He characterizes it as a heedful attunement , which corresponds to this notion of prasna in Mahayana Buddhism. So he sees a lot of connections between the Confucianism of Mencius and Buddhism. In any case this is part of what he means by being mindful so this is not cognition free. It's not a kind of mindless

performance. It is in fact, something that very much depends upon these various aspects of mindful attention, extension, and awareness. Varela spends some time fleshing out these processes with reference to Taoism as well and especially Buddhism, but also he introduces a lot of cognitive science because he is a neurobiologist by trade so to speak and someone who works in the area of cognitive science. Notably, this form of mindfulness in moral practice, or one could call this something like ethical attunement, to borrow a phrase from Dipaolo and de Jaegher, is still distinguished from rationalistic deliberation, and it still has some similarity to Dreyfus's account of intentionless, selfless being in the flow, something that reflective deliberation would disrupt. There's still those aspects of Dreyfus at work here, and ultimately, this is Varela's conception of ethical expertise, which requires a practice and a teacher also which is important for Varela, that correlates in some way with Dreyfus's progression from novice using rules given by a teacher to a point where rules are unnecessary and skill is embodied.

But the big thing is the notion of the good. One might think that his description of wisdom as a practice, and even his appeal to Mencius just is some altered version of the Dreyfus-like expertise, a kind of being mindful and self-enactively in the flow, not mindlessly, but somewhat different, mindfully in the flow. We might ask at this point where precisely is the notion of the good? Here so far for the most part it still looks like an enactive and still descriptive account of a set of practices, a form of expertise. For Mencius, the Good is tied up with natural kinds of innate dispositions plus the cultivation of those dispositions. This notion of a natural disposition may not satisfy everyone as a concept of the good and indeed it doesn't satisfy Varela, even if he retains it as a kind of implied starting point. Likewise, natural disposition should not satisfy enactivists, since nothing in enactive principles pre-ordain natural disposition as in any way intrinsically good. It's in his third lecture that he takes the analysis I think one step, or we might even say, he has a quantum Leap involved here. One step further, providing a great amount of neuroscientific detail about distributed neural networks to explain the idea of a selfless virtual self, an agent that emerges from a pattern or aggregate of personal processes and he then links this conception up with Buddhist practice. and I think this leads us to Varela's core thesis, where he says ethical know-how is the progressive firsthand acquaintance with the virtuality of self. the emphasis in his analysis is going to fall on cultivation. putting the self in question is a kind of deconstructive phase of Buddhist mindfulness practice, out of which comes something more positive, and here he quotes a Buddhist scholar who says when the reasoning mind no longer clings and grasps one awakens into the wisdom with which one was born and compassionate arises without pretense. So it's funny because Mencius's kind of natural disposition is implied here but what is added to this idea is the notion of compassion. so if we ask where precisely is the notion of the good in Varela's work, the answer is the Buddhist conception of compassion. The good is what compassion means, the good is to eliminate suffering. So for Varela and for Buddhist theories this is closely tied to the conception of or the elimination of the self as a source of suffering. In some Buddha traditions, the notion of self is associated with suffering, the notion of compassion is directed towards suffering in the sense that we are trying to reduce suffering, not only of oneself, but also of others. One can conceive of this selflessness in terms of skilled effortful coping which associates with the Taoist idea of what is called not doing. so summarizes when one is the action, no residue of self-consciousness remains to observe the action externally.



In the Buddhist practice of self deconstruction, to forget one self is to realize one's emptiness, to realize that one's every characteristic is conditioned and conditional. so it's this appeal to this notion of a selfless type of phenomenon that for Varela really constitutes the sort of core of the notion of goodness, since in fact by eliminating the self one eliminates suffering, and one acts compassionately. So this is something of a complex issue, what exactly a selfless self would be, or he sometimes uses the word virtual self, and we can say that for Varela the self is something like a succession of shifting patterns. on some Buddhist views the notion of non-self, and here I'm quoting a Buddhist scholar Rupert Gethen, the non-self is not an absolute denial of self as such, but a quite specific denial of self as an enduring substance. so there is some debate within Buddhist traditions and Buddhist traditions are thousands of years in the making, so there's always going to be some point of disagreement, and on some Buddhist accounts the self is not real. It's something like an illusion, on other accounts the self is not a substance but there's still something there that we would consider a self, and Varela is somewhat ambiguous between this when he talks about a selfless self or a virtual self. Even Dreyfus says something about this and this is quite a bit later, 12 years later after Varela was writing this. Dreyfus himself talks about a construct that comes to be only in dependence on complex configurations of multiple mental and material events which the Buddhists call the aggregates. so this is indeed something very similar to what Varela is thinking about, the notion of the Buddhist aggregates constitute sort of pattern that allow the Buddhists to say, well there's something there which we usually refer to as the self, but if we look at each aggregate, each component of this pattern, we find that there is no self in any of those components, so we can say that it is a kind of selfless self in that regard.

I've published a recent article on this together about 12 other people. Some of them are Buddhist scholars, some are psychologist, and we are looking at the notion of a self pattern as it works in Buddhist psychology and it is something that we can think about in terms of the aggregates that the Buddhists want to describe. One can develop a concept of enactive Phronesis. interestingly I think in his analysis, Varela does not use the term phronesis even if he offers an implicit improvement over Dreyfus's impoverished concept of phronesis. That is to say, he definitely acknowledges the importance of intersubjective social factors and he acknowledges that one requires a concept of the good, and therefore that it is more than simply cleverness. so it's a form of wisdom, even if not precisely Aristotelian phronesis or practical wisdom that Varela is going for. Both Dreyfus and Varela, however, downplay the role of reflective deliberation, since that idea belongs to a more cognitivist, overly rationalist conception, tied to moral judgment and I think right here however, is a motivation for a return to the concept of phronesis, so near the end of this explanation of ethical practice, Varela writes it is not that there is no need for normative rules in the relative world.

Clearly, such rules are a necessity in any society. These rules should be informed by the wisdom that enables them to be dissolved in the demands of responsivity to the particularity and immediacy of lived situations. This is at least part of a concept of phronesis which basically says phronesis operates best in those situations where the rules are not working, where we don't know what rules to follow, or phronesis could be the idea that we need something more to tell us which rules to follow and which rules not to follow. So we come to a situation where we have to make a judgment or we have to decide to act in a certain way. if we go only on rules we still

need something to tell us, well, in this situation what is the rule that we need to use?. So phronesis is in some sense about that. It's not clear however in Varela how such rules are to be set up, especially if they are designed to be dissolved. In any case setting up such rules would itself be an ethical task that would seemingly rely on reflective deliberation, as well as intersubjective communication, and in ways that may not be reducible to the type of selfless, ethical attunement that Varela is recommending. For Aristotle phronesis involves both intuitive, bodily coping as emphasized by Dreyfus, or Varela would say, ethical attunement, but also for Aristotle involves reflective deliberation when necessary. Once we think of setting up external structures, social practices, processes of cultivation, institutions and so forth, once we think of setting those structures up, structures that ultimately support the reduction of suffering and structures that help us to attain the good, then a proposal that importantly recognizes that virtues are not purely internal states or dispositions, then phronesis understood as deliberation, which itself may proceed through social communication, seems essential.

Something intrinsic to what Varela is saying about setting up such institutions seems to motivate us to come back to the idea that phronesis also involves deliberation, and that we shouldn't walk away from that. So the concept of phronesis should include, even for enactivists, both of these Aristotelian aspects. If one requires the phronesis of deliberation to establish rules, one also requires the phronesis of mindful attuned intuitive coping to deal with situations in which there are no rules, in a way that reflects responsiveness to the particularity and immediacy of lived situations, or to recognize when and what rules apply since rules are general, whereas each situation we encounter is particular. But the point is that we need both the kind of intuitive ability to work without rules, and also we need deliberation to set up our social arrangements in such a way that they facilitate our ability to act and flourish ethically. Reflective deliberation, however, can be viewed in different ways. It may involve the formation of plans and distal intentions, but we can also conceive of such processes as engaging in a kind of enactive practice, not just a cognitive propositional operation depending on knowing that, but as a skill or form of know-how, knowing how and when and with whom to deliberate, and knowing how to go about deliberating, and in addition, deliberation can be intersubjectively conducted in conversations with other people in trying to understand others, and getting them to understand you. That can form of a kind of deliberation of the ethical sort and as a process that aims to enact practical and social arrangements in ways that can facilitate ethical practice, something which can also include establishing rules within society. We know that deliberation, as well as coping with environmental and social factors can lead to changes in one's behavioral dispositions and the way that one attunes to acts in the world. Maria Mared and her colleagues suggest that by means of deliberation and planning a person may set up her environment and create social webs in such a way that it facilitates moral action.

We can understand This as a kind of self organizing process and as part of a cultivation process, and I know that, although the idea of relying on what Mared refers to as environmental factors such as interpersonal relationships, social and organizational settings and institutional structures. That's meant to be from her perspective part of a situationist critique of virtue ethics, well that would work as long as you think only a virtuous something going on just in your head or in inside in the subject, but if you think of in some way, of virtue as extended and in terms of just those kinds of institutions that Varela was mentioning, that that wouldn't be necessarily a

situationist critique. In any case, enactivist conceptions of the socially extended mind are relevant here, and here there's a couple of philosophers, Alfano and ScotBerg, who propose to model this kind of activity in extended mind terms. Virtue is considered a triadic relation between agent, social and non-social environment, and they give a nice example. They suggest for example that my friend who prevents me from doing something I would regret helps to evoke my good disposition and becomes in some way part of my moral character, a kind of extended virtue, which fits well with Aristotle's notion of hanging around with the right people in order to get phronesis. Varela's enactive solution emphasizes the enactive idea that he summarizes this way, the cognitive or virtuous self is its own implementation. Its history and its action are of one piece. Virtues would be considered agentic dispositions to reliably act for the good and with compassion in specific circumstances.

The enactive view, however, and I want to say this goes one step I think beyond where Varela was working, the enactive view should also acknowledge the importance of extended social structures. Varela does seem to leave room for this in his acknowledgment of the need for normative rules, but I think this requires a deliberative type of phronesis, which we don't find in either Dreyfus or Varela. So my conclusion is that, despite Varela's suspicions about Aristotelian phronesis, or at least the deliberative part of it, which he shared with Dreyfus, we can extend his adventuresome thinking on ethics, allowing that deliberative processes can play an important role in setting up rules and arranging environments for the training and cultivation of compassion. Which by means of the enactive reciprocity of relations between organism, agent, habits, and the physical and social environments, can facilitate our actions. The advantage that Varela has over Dreyfus and more recent enactive based ethics, is that he provides some notion of the good in the context of compassion and the diminishment of suffering.