

Book Review

A review of *Ethical Know-How: Action, Wisdom, and Cognition*, by Francisco J. Varela, 1999 (L. Gius & R.B Figli, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 85pp. ISBN 0804730334. \$13.95 USD.

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Originally conceived as a series of lectures for an audience at the University of Bologna, Francisco Varela's short but truly significant work, *Ethical Know-How: Action, Wisdom, and Cognition*, represents both his personal and professional reflections on ethical thought. Varela frames these reflections as a "project of being" rather than the usually-taken-for-granted system of judgment that demands a "detached, critical morality based on prescriptive principles" (p. 3). As such, Varela sets out in this thoughtful exposition a structure for understanding ethics that, he suggests, is "closer to wisdom than to reason, closer to understanding what is good than to correctly adjudicating particular situations" (p. 3). Drawing upon recent contributions from contemporary neurobiology and cognition, phenomenology, and the "wisdom traditions" of Confucianism and Buddhism, Varela offers the reader a critical rendering of ethics and ethical know-how—*savoir faire*, if you wish—rooted in the immediacy of human perception and action as an "immediate coping" with what is before us in the moment.

Ethics, Varela admits, is not his usual "terrain" and his reflections on the topic are more of a philosophical exploration than a prescriptive practice. Nevertheless, he believes that the topic is important to explore as it opens up the possibility for understanding ethics and a comparative view of ethical behaviour through a non-moralistic framework. Written as three

lectures, “Know-How and Know-What,” “On Ethical Expertise,” and “The Embodiment of Emptiness,” Varela pursues an understanding of ethics while addressing its relation to action, wisdom, and cognition—which are, for many of us, important discussions for our work in education, educational studies, and complexity-related views and understandings of social organizations and leadership.

Varela sets out the frame for this collection of lectures by suggesting that ethics is not simply a matter of a system of explicit rules and principles of conduct that are intended to guide the actions of an individual or group of individuals. This is a common approach for many people investigating the realm of ethical behavior. Varela’s approach, however, is limited to the understanding of human actions that spring from an immediate coping—that is, what is in front of us in the moment. Philosophers and scientists, generally speaking, have neglected the more pervasive and immediate forms of action in favor of exploring ethical behavior as the intentional and the deliberate. Varela posits that “we *always* operate in some kind of immediacy of a given situation. Our lived world is so ready-at-hand that we have no deliberateness about what it is and how we inhabit it” (emphasis in original, p. 9).

Varela calls this *ethical know-how*, which does not deal with the abstract, as “the proper units of knowledge are primarily *concrete*, embodied, incorporated, lived; that knowledge is about situatedness; and that the uniqueness of knowledge, its historicity and context, is not a ‘noise’ concealing an abstract configuration in its true essence” (emphasis in original, p. 7).

Ethical know-how, therefore, begins and ends in the concrete and the situated embodiment of everyday simple acts. Varela refers to this as “cognition as enaction” where “the world is not something that is given to us but something we engage in by moving, touching, breathing, and eating” (p. 8). Understood in this manner, knowing is dependent upon the experiences that a person has in a particular body with its various sensorimotor capacities embedded in the contingencies of the body’s own biological being and cultural setting.

Life, one might suggest, is not entirely “smooth sailing” and sometimes there are occasions when personal, emotional, and physical systems, to name only a few, break-down. During such moments, there is a feeling that we are not experts. Thus, as a beginner, we deliberate and analyze the situation at hand, seeking to feel at ease with the “bump in the road.” Instead of the more transparent, stable and grounded micro-identities of the immediate coping variety, we tend to notice when we stumble and are blind to those actions that we know well. These actions, moreover, are known so well that they escape our understanding.

In this text, Varela engages a shift that moves ethical behavior away from an inquiry solely based in Western scientific and philosophical traditions to an ethical philosophy situated in Eastern wisdom traditions. As an experienced Buddhist practitioner for many years and a former chief scientific advisor to the Dalai Lama, Varela is well qualified to comment on the wisdom traditions and their inherent connections with contemporary scientific understandings about cognition. The Eastern traditions have not, like their Western counterparts, ignored or otherwise neglected ethical coping or know-how.

The longest of Varela's lectures, and perhaps most relevant to *Complicity* readers, is his lecture on cognition and the cognizing agent. In particular, the neurons that constitute the brain—more specifically, the rise and fall of the neuronal self-organizing patterns—figure prominently in Varela's final thoughts on ethical behaviour. This lecture may, in fact, resonate for many individuals with an interest in complexity-related perspectives. In light of Varela's earlier discussions on ethical behaviour, expertise, and the wisdom traditions, the notion of *emergence* appears frequently throughout Varela's discussions.

Varela speaks to a kind of "architecture," metaphorically similar to a "society of agents," which he describes as giving rise to "*emergent properties of concurrent subnetworks*" (emphasis in original, p. 48). Emergence is one of the complexity-related properties of networks that do not need a central supervisor to conduct or direct the actions of an entire network or system. The property is found, as Varela remarks, in a variety of complex systems that are inspired and described by a number of biological organizations like social insects, schools of fish, or flocks of birds. The whole of such organizations is seemingly a larger coherent pattern, arising from the interactivity of many locally improvising parts, and yet the whole of the organization is nowhere to be found in the localized coordinated activity of the parts.

This early understanding of emergence has blossomed into a significant challenge to the dominant computationalist tradition, which has focused, by and large, on problems faced by beginners as opposed to experts. Attempts to work on problems as if one were a beginner have postulated that the senses are "successively elaborated to reconstitute a centralized and internal representation of the external world" (pp. 53–54). As such, there is decidedly more flexibility to a system that can act upon contingent matters, improvising with the constantly changing context rather than sticking with a prescribed plan. This is, at its heart, the way ordinary life unfolds. It is the mode of living organizations of relating with and to a much larger and deeply embedded context.

Varela's work, in general, and this book, in particular, offer many enduring and insightful perspectives to scholars in the field of education and

the complexity sciences. As complexity science becomes an emerging discourse within contemporary educational research and practice, Varela's account of ethical know-how could become an essential text that aptly weaves together divergent perspectives to develop a much needed complexity sensibility.

As a short, yet incredibly dense and sophisticated text, *Ethical Know-How* may pose a challenge to the novice reader with limited experience in the areas of complexity, neuroscience, and Buddhist philosophy. However, with persistence and patience, interesting and often unexpected connections can be made across the web of educational disciplines. Varela's text, with its rich and bold collection of insights can be described as a foundational text that can immeasurably shape the field of complexity-related theory and practice. For those who seek to bring mindfulness to their teaching and research engagements, Varela's work will be an important work to ponder over and puzzle with.

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