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Shared Sources and Different Aims

The relevance and potential value of insights from enactivism for the field of psychiatry have been recognized for some time now. Recently, two overarching frameworks have been proposed, one by Nielsen (Nielsen, 2020; Nielsen & Ward, 2018, 2020), and one by me (De Haan 2017; 2020a; 2020b; 2020c).[1] As mentioned by Nielsen (2021), we developed our approaches largely in parallel: I was not aware of Nielsen's work, and he only became aware of my work in the last phase of his PhD. Nielsen (2021) compares our approaches and concludes that our frameworks are 'largely compatible, do different work to one another, and are best understood as complimentary' (p. 175). I think, however, that the differences between our positions run much deeper, so that they are, in fact, incompatible. These differences result from fundamentally opposed views on what it means to be human. But before I get into our differences, let me acknowledge what we share.

Nielsen and I are attracted to enactivism[2] for similar reasons. We are both critical of neuroreductionist views that depict psychiatric disorders as internal problems in individual brains, and instead stress the relevance of taking the individual's whole body and larger (sociocultural) context into account. In enactivism, we find a framework that spells out how the mind is fundamentally tied to the body and to interactions with the environment (Thompson, 2007; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). More specifically, 'mind' refers to the sense-making activities of an organism interacting with its environment, which it depends on for its survival. Enactivism, furthermore, argues that the organism in its environment is best described as a complex, dynamical system. Applied to psychiatry, enactivism offers a) an integrative perspective on the relation between body, mind, and world;, and b) a complex systems approach which acknowledges causal complexity without ascribing a priory primacy to any of the processes involved.

Our aims—what we use enactivism for—are different though. My aim is to solve psychiatry's integration problem, that is, the problem of how to relate the heterogeneous factors that are at stake in the development and persistence of psychiat-

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ric disorders. Even though many people would be willing to embrace the (potential) influence of biological, psychological and social factors, the proof of the pudding will be in providing a proper explanation of how these factors work together and how (causal) interaction between them works. Enactivism provides an excellent basis for explaining such interactions, without resorting to either reductionism or dualism (de Haan, 2020a). As such it can offer an extended and improved version of Engel's (1977, 1980) biopsychosocial model (de Haan, 2020c). My enactive approach to psychiatry is thus clearly *not* a 'first person or phenomenological approach,' as Nielsen (2021) calls it. Personal experiences are indeed vital when trying to understand and explain psychiatric disorders—but so are (neuro) physiological processes, sociocultural influences, and existential considerations. The purpose of my account is precisely to relate personal experiences to these other processes and explain how these four heterogeneous dimensions affect one another. Enactivism's thesis about the continuity of life and mind and its concept of sense-making are useful to explicate how 'matters of the mind' are necessarily also matters of the body and matters of the world too (de Haan, 2020a, 2020b).

Nielsen, in contrast, is primarily interested in solving the demarcation problem between mental health and mental illness, or: 'why some behaviors should be considered disordered' (Nielsen & Ward, 2018, p. 801). This should in turn help to carve out psychiatry's 'diagnostic entities' (Idem, p. 813) and classify mental disorders accordingly. Nielsen mainly draws on enactive ideas to 'naturalize normativity' (Nielsen & Ward, 2020, p. 121) as he calls it. Because mere statistical rarity is not enough to establish a phenomenon as 'disordered', we need to adopt some norms to distinguish between 'dysfunction and functionality' (Nielsen & Ward, 2018, p. 811). Nielsen appeals to the enactive idea of organismic self-maintenance to establish such norms. Being alive is a precarious condition that requires constant, adaptive interaction with the environment. This means that certain aspects of and interactions with the environment are valuable to the organism because they are beneficial to its striving to stay alive. By the same token, Nielsen argues, we can use the criterion of self-maintenance to demarcate functional from dysfunctional behavior: functional is what contributes to and dysfunctional is what runs counter to the organism's self-maintenance. Applied to psychiatry, this leads Nielsen to define mental disorders as 'dysfunctions in the behavioral and experiential processes of striving organisms, constituted by relatively stable dynamic patterns within the brain–body–environment system' (2021, p. 177).

Two Major Differences: Integration and Views on Being Human

Our aims are not our only differences. Despite sharing several important enactive assumptions, our accounts differ in two major respects. The first has to do with the issue of integration. Nielsen adopts a 'multi-level approach' (Nielsen, 2021 p. 184), but does not further explicate how these levels are related. This makes his position vulnerable to both dualism and reductionism. We can indeed find traces of both, for instance in Nielsen's distinction between the physiological and psychological as forming different 'domains,' 'levels,' or 'scales' (Nielsen & Ward, 2020, p. 116), with somatic disorders being located primarily in the former and psychiatric disorders in the latter. Nielsen's quest for localizing mental disorders and determining 'which parts' of the system 'underlie' mental disorders is reminiscent of reductionist explanatory strategies and as such at odds with the complex dynamical system's approach of enactivism (de Haan, 2020a). The strategies of localizing and pinpointing that work well for 'decomposable systems' (Bechtel & Richardson, 2010) lose much of their sense when applied to complex dynamical systems. This difference between our positions also shows up in our respective discussions of Zachar and Kendler's (2007) taxonomy of theories on mental disorders: while Nielsen (Nielsen & Ward, 2018) picks sides for each of their six dichotomies, I instead argue that an enactive approach challenges these very dichotomies themselves, for instance the opposition between objectivism and evaluativism and between internalist and externalist positions (de Haan, 2020a).

For reasons of space, I will not go further into the issue of integration here and focus instead on the second, more fundamental difference between our approaches: our respective views on what it means to be human. In fact, all three differences that Nielsen (2021) sees between our positions, come down to this one major difference.

Nielsen understands human behavior in terms of self-maintenance. In fact, acting in such a way as to stay alive is his hallmark of mental health. I think this reduction of human behavior to organismic survival is both inaccurate and deeply problematic. It is true that enactivism so far has taken organismic self-maintenance as the root of sense-making. But even though this gets us quite far, it does not suffice when it comes to explaining human sense-making and its disorders. For it is not just staying alive that matters to us: we also want to live a *good* life, a dignified, meaningful life. I argue that this is a consequence of the fact that we do not only experience things, but that we can also *relate to* our experiences; that we can take a stance on ourselves and what we experience and the situation we are in. This capacity to relate, to take a stance, opens up what I call the *existential dimension*: a dimension that is not simply added on top of our being organisms, like the icing on a cake, but one that implies a transformation from organisms in their environments to self-aware persons in their (sociocultural) worlds. With our capacity to take a stance, new dimensions of meaning open up. Because we are not simply immersed in the here and now, we acquire a certain freedom to choose, and with that freedom we move from what we could call *metabolic* values to *existential* values: we care about being a good person, living a meaningful life, living a dignified life. As 'self-interpreting animals' (Taylor, 1985), our flourishing requires more than self-maintenance and the good life we are after has a moral dimension to it as well.

Of course we remain biological, bodily beings with certain biological needs, but even when it comes to those needs the functionality of our behavior does not exhaust its meaning. We need food to stay alive, clothing to keep us warm—but what I wear and what I eat, and when, and with whom expresses something about me—whether I want it to or not. Once we are capable of stance-taking, we cannot escape from being part of a meaningful world, both in what we encounter and what we express.

In contrast with what Nielsen (2021, p. 178) says, the existential dimension does *not* solely or primarily have to do with 'thinking existentially'. Surely, stance-taking includes the ability to think about existential questions and to deliberately reflect on things, but most often our stances will be implicit in our actions. Our stances on gender roles, for instance, are typically not a set of well-formulated norms, but are rather implicit in how we behave, what we wear, and our estimations of others. We first and foremost enact our stances in our actions. The existential dimension then refers to the space of meaning that is opened up by our stance-taking capacities, transforming our way of being in the world from organisms to persons. As persons, we remain just as embodied and embedded as all organisms: in fact, it is in and through our (embodied) interactions with others, embedded in our specific sociocultural practices, that we develop the capacity for stance-taking in the first place (de Haan, 2020a).

Whereas Nielsen explains psychiatric disorders by appealing to the precariousness of remaining alive, I think we should rather look at the precariousness of living a good life; of maintaining oneself not just as a living organism, but as a person in the world. And whereas Nielsen eventually aims at providing a functionalist account of what goes wrong in which mechanism, I think psychiatric disorders in the end concern a person's relation to themselves and their world. More specifically, I think psychiatric disorders refer to structurally disordered patterns of sense-making, typically biased in a certain direction (i.e., overly anxious, overly meaningless, or overly meaningful). This sense-making is *existentialized* sense-making: sense-making that is transformed by our capacity to take a stance (de Haan, 2020a, 2020b). In other words, our minds are not only fundamentally embodied and embedded, but existential too—and if we want to understand illnesses of the mind, we should take into account all of its dimensions: physiological, experiential, sociocultural, and existential.

This existential dimension comes to the fore in psychiatry in various ways: as a central part of the disorder (such as fear for the fear in anxiety disorders), as being affected by the disorder (as in the case of depression coloring one's reflective stance), or as a modulatory factor in the course and/or treatment of the disorder (including how one relates to the diagnosis, feelings of shame versus acceptance, and stances towards different treatment options) (de Haan, 2017, 2020a).

Nielsen's position, by contrast, is a completely a-moral, non-existential one. The sheer aim of staying alive is taken as the criterion for mental health. But while the striving for self-maintenance may be enough to determine norms for the behavior of organisms in their environment, it is not enough to determine norms for the ways in which persons interact with each other and in their sociocultural worlds. Nielsen tries to expand the scope of self-maintenance by also including the norms of functioning well within one's sociocultural group, but the final criterion remains individual self-maintenance: being part of a group should contribute to that same goal.

The limits of such a purely functionalist approach become especially clear in cases in which people act in accordance with their (existential) values, even though this clashes with their interests in self-maintenance. Nielsen and Ward (2020) discuss the examples of a homosexual expressing his sexuality in a homophobic society, and a political activist speaking out in a repressive, totalitarian regime. It seems that on Nielsen's account, such behavior is not only inexplicable, but should even be considered mentally disordered. Nielsen and Ward (2020) try to save their definition by adding an addendum stating that norms cannot be used define a disorder when they are derived from norms of the social group that are either not functional—that is, they do not support their individual member's self-maintenance (as in the case of the homophobic society)—, or are functional, but arbitrary (as in the case of the totalitarian regime). They still cannot explain, however, why anyone would care to express their sexuality or political ideals in the first place, let alone run considerable risks while doing so. In a similar way, they try to explain that altruistic behavior is not mentally disordered because it is *actually* self-interested behavior: altruistic deeds would increase one's social status which is in turn beneficial for one's self-maintenance. So Nielsen wiggles his way out of labeling behavior directed at a greater good as mentally disordered, but only by claiming that such behavior is covertly self-interested anyway. Meanwhile, skilled psychopaths still form shining examples of mental health insofar as they manage to manipulate their environments to optimally serve their individual self-maintenance. In this way, Nielsen's definition ends up giving us a cynical, and I would say twisted, picture of what it means to be mentally healthy, based on an impoverished view of what it means to be human.

Possible Objections: Human Exceptionalism, Life–Mind Discontinuity, and Non-Natural Values

Why would Nielsen not want to adopt the relevance of stance-taking and the ensuing existential dimension, or anything like it? He gives three reasons (2021). First, he fears my position entails a form of human exceptionalism. My position certainly embraces exceptionalism in that it suggests it makes a fundamental difference whether or not an organism is capable of stance-taking and its sense-making is thereby transformed into existentialized sense-making. Mental disorders, I argue, are structurally disordered patterns in this existentialized sense-making. We are such existential sense-makers—but, as I explicitly stated, if, or to what extent, other organisms are also capable of this is an empirical matter. Contrary to Nielsen (2021), I am not inclined to think bacteria have mental disorders, but I am well aware that at least some elements or 'precursors' of stance-taking capacities have been found in other animals, like the ability to recognize oneself in the mirror and to plan one's actions. Whether or not my position is one of human exceptionalism thus remains to be seen.

Second, Nielsen thinks that my position gives up on the continuity between life and mind and that it is therefore no longer an enactive position. It does not. The continuity between life and mind is

crucial for the integrative power of enactivism and I fully adopt the idea that there is no life without some form of sense-making and no sense-making without life. This continuity, however, does not preclude the possibility of qualitative differences in the *kinds* of sense-making involved. Life and mind are continuous, but I argue that not all minds of all living beings are alike in their capacities. As noted above, our capacity for stance-taking does not annihilate the fact that we are embodied, embedded beings. On the contrary: we develop this ability in and through our (embodied) social interactions with others, supported by our specific sociocultural practices (de Haan, 2020a).

Finally, given his own use of enactivism to 'naturalize normativity' (Nielsen & Ward, 2020), Nielsen's main worry about the existential dimension is whether existential values are still 'naturalized' values. Now this is a tricky question. 'Naturalizing' is after all a notoriously vague notion that gets used in different ways. It is typically meant to show a commitment to a more or less strict 'scientific' perspective—but that too leaves ample room for discussion. Let's assume that Nielsen at least wants to rule out any appeal to supernatural entities or phenomena. Now there are three main ways in which to ground values: what we value can be seen as 1) the corollary of our individual or species' survival (instrumentalist/functionalist accounts), as 2) the result of our own projections (subjectivist accounts), or as 3) a recognition of the intrinsic value of that which we value (objectivist accounts). Nielsen's is an instrumentalist account: what we value is derived from its function as a means to the end of self-maintenance. Such a view has many advantages, including its naturalist character, but as we saw, it also has the important disadvantage of being unable to do justice to our experience of valuing certain things as ends in themselves rather than as self-interested means. Instrumentalist views explain values by explaining them away. Subjectivist accounts too can be naturalistic, but likewise fail to capture our intuition/experience that there is something valuable in what we value. Objectivist accounts, on the other hand, do assume that we value certain things because they are *intrinsically* valuable. This has the advantage of preserving the special character of values as ends in themselves, but the disadvantage of disconnecting what we value from who we are, leading to a doubtful ontological status of those goods.

So the question is whether it is possible to do justice to values as ends in themselves while retaining a naturalist perspective. I think an enactive perspective allows us to do just that, because of its thoroughly relational outlook. From an enactive perspective, we can see values as *relational realities*: the source of what we value is neither located in ourselves nor completely inherent in what we value as such: values rather result from the relation between (the coupling of) persons and their worlds. This does not make them arbitrary though: given our specific existence, some things *are* valuable to us. Our existential values are comparable in that sense to the metabolic values (or 'norms' as Nielsen (Nielsen & Ward, 2020) calls them) of self-maintaining organisms. Thompson (2007, p. 418) gives the example of the value of sugar as a nutrient for a bacterium: this value is neither intrinsic to the sucrose molecules nor a mere projection of the bacterium, but it is what he calls a 'relational feature' that depends on both the properties of sugar as well as the properties of this bacterium's metabolism. For us, existential beings, the concerns that come from the pursuit of living a good life are just as real and relevant.

An account of psychiatric disorders needs to do justice to the fact that we are not only embodied and embedded, but also existential beings—a task that an enactive approach is especially up to.

Notes

1. I follow Nielsen (2021) in taking the papers he has written together with Tony Ward as representing Nielsen's framework.

2. Nielsen talks of a '3e framework' with the 3 'e's referring to embodiment, embeddedness and enactivism. I use only the term 'enactive' as this by its definition includes embodiment and embeddedness (Varela et al., 1991). The fourth 'e' that is often added refers to the extended mind theory, but Nielsen and I both agree that this position differs in crucial aspects from enactivism as to what embodiment and embeddedness entail (de Haan, 2020a; Nielsen & Ward, 2018).

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