



MIND & LIFE

Mind & Life Podcast Transcript

Amy Cohen Varela – The Power of Undoing

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Opening Quote – Amy Cohen Varela (00:00:03): *Self-reference is the capacity to be able to look and see how what you are doing is creating things in the world. And so when two sides of a polarization decide that "A world" is objectively true, and "B world" is objectively true, there's no conversation, but it's co-creation where the two sides were creating realities against each other. And so the only way you can stop that kind of escalation is by acknowledging your participation in the creation of those realities, and working on yourself.*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:00:46): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. Today I'm speaking with Amy Cohen Varela. Amy is a scholar of the mind through her work as a clinical psychologist and psychoanalytic therapist. And she's also the widow of Francisco Varela, one of the co-founders of the Mind & Life Institute. And she continues to share his vision and work through the offerings of Mind & Life Europe, our sister organization, where she's chair of the board. If you're not familiar with Francisco Varela's work, he was an influential thinker in many fields—in biology and philosophy—but most relevant for this show, in cognitive science, and what's become contemplative science. We've discussed some of his ideas on the show before, like in the episode with Evan Thompson about embodied mind, Roshi Joan Halifax about enactive compassion, and Juan Santoyo about neurophenomenology. We get into these ideas again in this episode, as well as Amy's own fascinating work and perspective on the mind.

(00:01:50) We delve into some really interesting (and for me, unexpected) territory about the process of psychoanalysis, how that unfolds, the skills that are learned, and how it all relates to contemplation. Amy also shares how she and Francisco met, and how more than a decade with him has impacted her own work. We talk, of course, about understanding enaction and also meaning and participatory sense-making, and how that view of the mind can change us. Amy reflects on connections between Francisco's ideas and Buddhist philosophy, and we talk about integrating subjective and objective viewpoints, or first- and third-person, a goal that's often held in contemplative science. And Amy shares a really helpful nuance about how we tend to oversimplify both Buddhism and science when it comes to that dynamic. We also talk about the power of curiosity and openness, doing and undoing the self through psychoanalysis, and one of Francisco's most powerful offerings that I've encountered—his personal reflections on the Chilean civil war, which he lived through, and some critical and timely implications for polarization today.

(00:03:07) If you're interested in learning more about enactment, check out Mind & Life Europe's new free course, which will be running for four semesters called Core Enaction. Amy describes more about this in the episode, and it sounds like a fascinating deep dive into this perspective. You can find a link to that in the show notes, along with other interviews with Amy, and links to some of Francisco's relevant work, including an audio recording from 1979 of Francisco delivering the talk about the Chilean civil war. If you're interested, it's pretty amazing to hear these powerful insights in his own voice.

(00:03:44) I love the sense of warmth and a kind of emergence that comes out of this conversation with Amy. It was such a pleasure to speak with her about all of these topics. I hope you find something here that expands your mind towards interconnection. I'm so happy to share with you Amy Cohen Varela.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:04:05): It is my great pleasure to be joined today by Amy Cohen Varela. Amy, thank you so much for being here and welcome to the show.

Amy Cohen Varela (00:04:13): Thank you so much, Wendy, for inviting me.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:04:16): I always love to start by hearing people's back backstories and understanding a little bit how they came to be doing the work that they're doing today. And you in particular, of course, have a really important story with the history of Mind & Life and your relationship with Francisco Varela. So I would love to hear how you got interested in clinical psychology and your path there, and then meeting Francisco, and how that all unfolded.

Amy Cohen Varela (00:04:43): Thanks, Wendy. Well as you know, I live in France. And I met Francisco here in France in the middle of the '80s. So how I got here or how I got here and how I met him can go back a little bit. I was born in the United States and studied in the United States. And I was always, in terms of my life interests and my studies interests were always split between biology and literature.

(00:05:10) So I studied literature in college, but always had a toe in biology. I was always taking a course here or there in genetics, or anything new that was coming up. So it was sort of like I didn't want to be trapped in any kind of disciplinary silo. And Brown University, which was where I went for my undergrad, was a really great place for that because they left all of us with, certainly in the '70s, all of us with a lot of freedom in terms of making decisions about what we wanted to work on.

(00:05:44) So I ended up studying comparative literature—also because I didn't want to be siloed into one national literature like French or Russian, which were my languages, or English literature. And I also loved literary theory and literary history. And so the late '70s was a really great time for people to be in undergrad or grad students in the United States, because it was sort of a high theory time. It was the time of Derrida and deconstruction, and psychoanalytic theory for studying literature. And I remember it as being kind of breathlessly exciting. It was intense. The questions we were interested in were questions like the status of writing, what is writing, the status of the author, questions about textuality, meaning, semiotics. So probably my interest in mind started there, in that literary theory background.

(00:06:47) And then I moved to France. And when I moved to France, I moved to France after starting graduate school at Columbia. But when I came here, my goal of becoming an academic teaching literature in some place was already kind of wobbling.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:07:06): Is that what brought you to Paris, was a career move or...

Amy Cohen Varela ([00:07:10](#)): No, actually I came to perfect my French. Because to do comparative literature, you have to read every national literature in the original. And so I needed to work on that. So I came temporarily, and then at one point as a junior, actually a junior year abroad. And then after two years of grad school, I came back to work on that... to work on the French. And that was when I started having doubts.

([00:07:35](#)) So maybe being in Paris had an influence on me... I also fell in love. So all those things are part of the story. But it remained that there was this sense that I was, the way I put it in my mind was, this goal that I'd had all my life to teach—I was kind of working on a zapper. That somebody had pushed the button, and I was going to do this, and I wasn't sure I totally owned that decision. That's why I say it was kind of wobbly.

([00:08:07](#)) And the way I theorized it at the time was that I didn't feel like, so I was in my early twenties, that I felt like I wanted to work with people, but in a different kind of relationship than that between a teacher and a student. Now I realize that I had a very caricatural idea of what a teacher/student relationship was. But that was my thought at the time, that I wanted some kind of work where I was doing something different. And also at the time, in Paris, I started a psychoanalysis.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:08:40](#)): For yourself?

Amy Cohen Varela ([00:08:42](#)): A personal analysis, yes. And there, I encountered a really different kind of relationship, as you can imagine, than a student teacher relationship, that for me, had to do with learning... But it was more about how knowledge emerges than about the transmission of knowledge. That was the way I remember thinking about it when I was experiencing it in a very fascinated way in the beginning.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:09:10](#)): Maybe it's worth just saying a little bit about the process of psychoanalysis, in case folks aren't familiar with that method.

Amy Cohen Varela ([00:09:18](#)): Yeah. Well, it's a process that is part of what's called the psychodynamic school. It was one of the first therapies of its kind using words. So the first talking therapies created by Freud in the latter part of the 19th century, in the early part of the 20th century. And what people may be able to relate to is the idea of free association. So it's very non-directive. As in any therapy, people go to it because they're suffering. But the analyst is not going to necessarily focus on either what the symptoms, for example, or the reasons for suffering that the patient (or the client or whatever—I prefer patient) comes up with at the beginning of the work, but rather asks the person to talk about what's going through their mind.

([00:10:11](#)) And then the analyst, or the psychoanalyst, will intervene from time to time, but generally in ways that are quite brief and subtle, that are intended to encourage people to continue talking.

([00:10:25](#)) And one of the things that you learn when you start doing it from the patient side is that when you're talking, you're not listening. And it takes a while, but eventually what you start to do in a situation where you're doing all of the talking because the analyst is intervening very little, is to start to listen to yourself.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:10:48](#)): Interesting.

Amy Cohen Varela (00:10:49): In a very, very different way than when, for example, we're having a conversation like the conversation we're having. And when you develop that kind of listening to yourself, a space opens up. You might almost say you become de-centered. You can move away or move around what you're saying, and look at it very differently. So what one thinks when one is starting an analysis is, "Oh I'm just repeating this story. I'm repeating that story. I said the same thing in the last session."

(00:11:23) And as you sharpen your capacity to listen to yourself, you start saying, "Well, I'm going to say this differently." Or, "I just said that differently." And those subtle differences—and this may all sound very effete in some ways, but it isn't—are very striking. Because we're talking about things that you've thought about your own self for maybe years, maybe decades, that seem like solid self-understandings. And they start to disintegrate under your own ear.

(00:12:00) So the analyst is there also in a way to encourage that, and to nurture that, and to keep that going. And at times, the analyst will make something called an interpretation, so will make some kind of maybe slightly more narrative comment about what he or she is hearing. But often, that's not even necessary.

(00:12:26) Now, the listening thing is very, very interesting because when you move to the other side of the relationship and become an analyst, one realizes that it's very, very hard to just listen. And there, there's a couple of interesting things about the analyst... There's a lot of things to say about the analyst listening process, but maybe a couple of interesting ones is when you're a beginner analyst, you tend to intervene more. And I realized quite early on, luckily for me, that when I would get the urge to intervene, it was because something the patient was saying to me was something that I couldn't handle. Something that might have been making me a little nervous or a little anxious, something that they were evoking that didn't agree with me in some way or another. And I quickly realized that in fact, speaking is a way of shutting the other up.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:13:27): Right... And therefore removing that difficult stimulus.

Amy Cohen Varela (00:13:32): Exactly. And the other thing was—and this I learned much, much later when I met Francisco and started learning a little bit about contemplative practices— that it's not exactly the same thing, or a homology, or isomorphic if you will, but the listening process on the part of the analyst does entail kind of an internal monitoring. Because everything you hear, you're associating with yourself. And those associations take you away from the listening process. So if you're listening to someone and they're saying X, and you're thinking, "Oh X, I've been in that situation," then you're not listening anymore. So you have to bring your mind back. So their words are kind of like breath, that you bring your attention back to continually. So it's not exactly the same, but there is this continuous monitoring of the thoughts as they come and go—with the awareness in this particular situation that if you go with a thought, which inevitably we do from time to time, you're not listening to your patient anymore. And they're just... well they're not talking into a vacuum because they're still doing the work, but you should be listening. *[laughter]*

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:14:53): Right. Well, thank you. That was fascinating. And I realize I've taken us off the path now of your story. So you were saying that you were in Paris and then you were undertaking psychoanalysis...

Amy Cohen Varela (00:15:03): Yeah. And so I loved this relationship, in fact. And in some ways, the relationship... this was well before I knew about any of the cognitive science, or any of the Buddhist studies that I would eventually learn about from Francisco. But the way I experienced the analytic relationship as a patient was a kind of a milieu. It was really like my niche, my ecological niche—and at the time, remember, I was in my early twenties, I was in these schools—where there was no pressure to produce brilliant pieces of thinking, which had been sort of my life story. And in fact, even though it was a learning situation, that it was a place of undoing. And this type of thinking also resonated with me when I met Buddhism, and I met Francisco, and enactive cognitive science.

(00:16:04) By that I mean it was about learning, but it was also about learning what went wrong with the way I had learned a whole lot of things throughout my whole life. And undoing some of that. So I experienced it as a kind of really liberating process, of working with doing and undoing myself. It sounds a little bit impressionistic, but...

(00:16:28) And also understanding that what I could know about myself was kind of pitifully partial, you know? You can only know parts. And Freud said, "Man is not master of his own house." There's an whole iceberg underneath that ego tip that it's helpful to at least be aware of its existence. And I found that frightening and liberating at the same time.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:16:57): And so then did that spur you to undertake a training to become a psychoanalyst?

Amy Cohen Varela (00:17:02): That's what I did. I did a training in clinical psychology. I sort of left literature. I decided to stay in France, and I started a degree in clinical psychology, which was in an interesting department because it kind of mirrored what I'd done in college. We were doing a lot of biology, neurophysiology, and at the same time, learning the basics of psychodynamic psychotherapy, and then a psychoanalytic training in parallel to that. And that's where I was actually, when I met Francisco. I was actually just about a year or two out of finishing that when I met Francisco in the mid-'80s... Do you want to hear about how we met?

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:17:45): Yes, absolutely! I don't think I've ever heard this story.

Amy Cohen Varela (00:17:48): The meeting story. *[laughter]* So even though I spoke French pretty well, after all that education and living in France, I had not yet given a talk in French. And I was invited by a group of systemic family therapists, which is a particular type of family therapy that was very famous (and still is quite well known), that was in fact developed by people like Paul Watzlawick and Gregory Bateson. And actually, it was my first link with Francisco, because I had known these people for several years, and they were running a day-long conference with a whole group of speakers. And they said, "Amy, you should really give it a try, give a talk." And so I was kind of new to psychology. I was still in grad school, and I had never given a talk to a big audience in French. And so I threw myself into it.

(00:18:44) And so it was a day-long conference. There must have been about 10 speakers. And the sort of centerpiece of the whole show was this scientist named Francisco Varela who was speaking right after lunch. And I was speaking at the end of the day. And so the morning went on, and I got more and more nervous. And we had lunch, and I was very nervous about giving my talk. And so I decided to skip the session right after lunch—not thinking, "Oh my goodness, I'm going to miss the star." But I decided to skip it and just take a walk and relax. I had what the French called a *trac*, I had a stage fright. And then I went in, and I went back, and I saw the afternoon, and I gave my talk.

(00:19:33) And right after my talk, there was a champagne cocktail, which happens in France. You know, we get champagne at the end of the day. [laughter] And this cute guy jumps up on the stage because people were getting up and filing into the big room where the cocktail was, and starts asking me some questions about my talk. And there he was. So I said, "Well, let's go get a glass of champagne." And that was how we met.

(00:19:59) And so [laughter]... in the beginning of our conversation, I have to say it was a little bit uncomfortable, because he was talking as though I'd heard his talk. And I was like, "Well..."

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:20:13): That's fantastic! [laughter] "Actually, I missed your talk..."

Amy Cohen Varela (00:20:16): "But you'll tell me about it, I'm sure," which of course, we had many years then to do.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:20:20): Yes. Yes.

Amy Cohen Varela (00:20:23): So yeah. I actually did end up telling him that I missed it. And he thought it was actually... I think he found it endearing.

(00:20:29) – musical interlude –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:21:01): So, I'd love to dig in a little bit to some of Francisco's ideas—it's such a vast landscape, and I know we won't be able to cover nearly a fraction in this conversation. But certainly I want to talk about enaction. I would like to get there, but I don't know if we need building blocks to get there.

Amy Cohen Varela (00:21:20): So I think what Francisco—and Evan certainly went through all of this a whole lot better than I ever could—what Francisco was going forward with (and Evan, because enaction is theirs), was... The way I would talk about it is a way of thinking about what life is and what mind is that's grounded in the idea of life and natural systems. And that's where the autopoiesis and the autonomy thing comes, in that there's a French biologist who died not even two years ago, who was a very close friend of Francisco's and mine, who wrote a beautiful book called *Breathing Life Back into Biology*. And he said that the models of mind and the way biologists think about life have become progressively more machine-like and technological. You can use the example of defining life, for example, by saying it's managed or engineered by a genetic code that is a group of proteins that code for more proteins and biochemical reactions. So if you think about life this way, you don't do biology. You do biochemistry. If you think about mind as a machine, you don't do psychology. You do technology. I mean, I'm being a little bit simplistic about it.

(00:22:55) And so the idea of enaction, I think is the apogee of this breathing life back into biology and taking really seriously what Evan Thompson calls the continuum between life and mind. And that mind is a lively thing and not a machine. Your brain is not a computer that takes information in from the outside, and processes it with its hardware. And enaction is an understanding of cognition that is based on our body—and our body includes there our brain, but does not give precedence to the brain—the interactions of our body with the world and sees cognition as a kind of a meaning-making through these interactions. That's what's juicy about enaction in my opinion, that sees cognition as a thing that's lively and full of life, that isn't... People say, "Wait a minute, I'm processing that," you know? But thinking

about meaning-making— or cognition is a dryer word, I like the word meaning-making, I also like the word sense-making—as being an emergent property as in the psychoanalytic situation, as an emergent property in a space that's created through relationships.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:24:30): Yeah. That's beautifully said. I have a strange question that feels really silly even as it's being formed in my mind. But what do we mean exactly by meaning? It seems obvious, but then I tried to break it down and I was like, "Wait a minute. I don't know if I can articulate that." And so much of this is about making sense of the world and meaning of the world. Is there a way of exploring that a little more?

Amy Cohen Varela (00:24:58): Well, I don't know if we can define it. I think we can certainly explore it. For me, it has to do with affirming something. So making meaning—let's use it "verb"ally, not meaning as just an object. And here, we come back to this theory of Francisco's that has to do with the autopoiesis. And in the autopoietic sense, the activity of say the cell, even an amoeba, is to keep on going through its own self affirmation. And I think that for us, it's a way of affirming something that has to do with an identity, that actually keeps us keeping on, to put it the way they put it in the '70s, or the '80s, or whenever we were saying that. *[laughter]* But that's really what it is.

(00:25:51) And so it has to do more with an action than it has to do with attaining an object or with describing something. And maybe that's why it's called enaction. I never thought about it that way, but... So meaning, yeah, it's a great question. But I think that answer is probably the closest one to it that I can imagine—that it has to do with what keeps us wanting to keep living and what keeps us going. Now in a more concrete sense, meaning-making and sense-making, or cognition in the sense that Francisco uses it, also has to do with survival, and adaptation, and that sort of thing.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:26:36): Does it also have to do with understanding causes? Other theories of mind, like predictive models of mind focus a lot on cognition (or just our perception and the way that mind works) as having a lot to do with understanding the causes of the stimuli that we are perceiving, therefore enabling us to operate in the world, and survive, and keep on keeping on. Do you think of that as a piece of it too?

Amy Cohen Varela (00:27:07): Yeah. You know, the whole predictive processing idea, it's not my table. But I think the causal idea... certainly we have priors, and we have experience that then helps us to do some kind of prediction or some kind of, to go for what we want to go for and to avoid what we want to avoid. For sure. I mean, in the most basic sense, yes.

(00:27:36) There's another thing to say about enaction, and that is that enaction, because of its focus on living ways of sense-making, that brings in this sense of aliveness, part of that is reflexiveness. Which is not something that enters into models of cognition, or models of meaning that are information-based. Like, the information's out there, my brain picks it up, processes it, and spits out an answer. This idea—that comes from the far past of cybernetics, but also exists in physics—that the being, be it a cell, or multicellular, or an animal, or advanced primate, a human, whatever, has an effect on the world. We'd call it an observer effect. But has an effect on the world, and participates in the creation of it.

(00:28:36) And so in that sense (and Evan Thompson has remarked this in several interesting points, including in his book *Mind in Life*, but also in many talks that he gives) what makes the difference between cognitive science that's information based—so, information's out there, I take it in, my machine computes it and spits out something—and enaction is that in enaction, there's this added layer

of awareness of the participation of the living being in the creation of meaning, and the creation of the milieu or the reality that it exists in, or that it is moving about in and creating meaning in.

(00:29:20) So there's this idea also of participation. That's where wonderful new enactive thinkers like Hanne De Jaegher, or Mog Stapleton, or Ezequiel Di Paolo have come up with this notion of participatory sense-making. Which is that meaning—so we're getting back to meaning—meaning is made, not in my head or in your head, but in the space between us. So it's through participating together in a relationship that we create meaning. It's, to some degree, I dream you up, and to some degree, you dream me up, in terms of how we function together in this conversation. But the conversation is a third thing—that's not you, not me. Or that's both you and both me. Francisco wrote a great paper called, *Not One, Not Two*, that refers to this principle. And Evan Thompson gave a wonderful talk about it for Mind & Life Europe in a series we did called Ouroboros series, which is available on our YouTube channel.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:30:29): Yes, we'll link to those in the show notes. Fantastic. So this is all starting to sound very Buddhist, in a way, emphasizing interdependence, and the ways that we're all embedded together and connected together. Do you know if Francisco was developing these theories and embracing that view before he came to Buddhism? Or did his interaction with Buddhism influence the development of these ideas?

Amy Cohen Varela (00:30:56): It was all at the same time, actually.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:30:59): Interesting.

Amy Cohen Varela (00:31:00): Yeah. Francisco and the kind of braid of science and Buddhism, the more we learn and dig up about Francisco... I mean obviously, I have a handle on a certain amount of information about Francisco, but he was already 39 or 40 even when I met him. So in the earlier years, the deeper we go back, the more we see that he was really into it from a very early point.

(00:31:26) And for example, in 1968, when he was 22 and went to Harvard to do his doctorate, he was already reading really eclectically, lots of different materials, including materials on Jungian psychotherapy, including materials on—this was besides his whole Western philosophical background—was reading about Sufism. And then when he was in Cambridge during '68, '69, he probably got a first edition of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*.

(00:32:05) So this was well before he actually started a Buddhist practice. But I think what's coming up when I look at this with people who are studying his past history, and also when I talk to his family, is that this interest in spirituality goes way, way, way back.

(00:32:22) The Buddhism, strictly speaking, still starts very young. But let's say it doesn't start until he is 23 or 24, whereas he was already trying a lot of other things before then. And he was very curious about all sorts of ways of exploring the mind. But then when he met Chögyam Trungpa, after the Chilean coup d'etat in '73, I think that's when he really decided that he was going to focus his life on Buddhist meditation.

(00:32:54) So the theory of autopoiesis, which he developed in the early '70s—late '60s, even—with Humberto Maturana was wound up in that. That was already starting. He did an awful lot of work, very young. He was in a rush. *[laughter]*

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:33:15](#)): Well, another piece that I feel like has a lot to do with interacting with Buddhist ideas and contemplative practice is Francisco's emphasis on integrating first-person and third-person methodologies. And I feel like that has also influenced the field of contemplative science as it has evolved, quite significantly. So maybe we could talk just a little bit about that. How do you think about the bringing together of those perspectives, and maybe just saying a bit about what those perspectives are?

Amy Cohen Varela ([00:33:51](#)): Yeah. So first-person being a subjective account of a personal experience. So what you're thinking, what you're feeling at any particular moment. And the third-person being a "moving back" from it, or having it looked at by another person, which would be objectifying it in some way and turning it into a kind of object of study. And the idea that Francisco had that's incarnated, or at least it's made into a research program called neurophenomenology, clearly does relate to his relationship on the one hand with science and on the other hand with Buddhism.

([00:34:28](#)) But I think it's not so much in a way that Buddhism is first-person—even though that's the obvious idea that would come to mind—and science is third-person. And I think sometimes when we fall into the idea that contemplative practice is what brings out the first-person, and science is what elucidates the third-person, or elucidates the object, we're being a little bit too simplistic.

([00:34:59](#)) I think for Francisco, it's definitely true that when you are a meditator and developing an understanding of contemplative mind, that it's sort of natural to see that as an expansion of the first-person as a development. And certainly, one must see it as a familiarization—that's what meditation means, right—as a familiarization with your experience, and the experience you're having of your mind.

([00:35:28](#)) Where I think it's a bit of a simplification is because, first of all, contemplative practice is not some kind of pure thing that doesn't involve a lot of thoughts and theories and philosophy and context that's very much objectified. So it's not pure first. And for Francisco—and this is where he's extraordinary, out of the ordinary as a scientist, is that—even before he knew about contemplative practice, he knew that science wasn't third-person. He knew that all science is absolutely permeated with the subjectivity of the people who were doing it. And when I was talking earlier about observer participation, the observer is always part of what's being observed, and that's true for all of science.

([00:36:25](#)) So I think he had a very precocious intuition about the fact that science is, sometimes he called it a mixed object. It's first and third, or it's actually first and second and third. Because there's intuitions, there's subjective experience, there are objective objects of knowledge, natural objects of knowledge, and then there's inter-subjective consensus. So science involves first, second, and third base (if you want to put it in baseball terms), as actually does Buddhism, contemplative practice. So those two domains were not really so different in his mind.

([00:37:09](#)) But when you take a program like the neurophenomenology program, and you're doing it in a scientific context, he did, in the beginning at least, focus on the first-person side of contemplative practice to the degree that, as he always said, just because you have a mind, doesn't mean you're an expert on your mind. And why don't we take these people who have been contemplating the way their minds work and act, and use them to nourish and nurture our experiments and our experimental designs for thinking about mind from a natural science point of view? So he did pinpoint that, in spite of the fact that there isn't this first/third clarity between contemplative practice and science, one on the one hand and the other on the other hand.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:38:06): And I think at that time it was pretty unusual to think about incorporating first-person or subjective accounts into studies of mind and brain... because I think there had been that history in psychology of kind of discounting our own ability to report on mental states, and that there's all these biases and things like that. So to reemphasize that, I think was a really radical move at that time.

Amy Cohen Varela (00:38:32): It was, exactly. Exactly. It was forbidden... you know, if you had anything personal... No. So yeah, you're absolutely right. It was a very radical move. And when you think about it, so it was a radical move that I think in Francisco's trajectory was buttressed theoretically by the cybernetics movement, and by people like Bateson and the systems theory people, and that gave him fodder to dare that. And when you think about it also, it had been happening earlier in physics with relativity theory. So it existed, but it existed really in silos. And so it was a daring move. And I won't say that it's marginal, but I would say that people have difficulty swallowing it.

(00:39:20) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:39:50): So I'm curious... With all the time you spent with Francisco, and of course being steeped in these ideas, I'm sure they've become integrated into your own work as a psychoanalyst and the way that you think about the mind in that setting. So I'm really curious to hear how you feel that those ideas have shaped your approach to your work in psychotherapy.

Amy Cohen Varela (00:40:16): Yeah. First if I might, I would like to say a little bit about what it was like to live with him.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:40:25): Yeah, I'd love to hear.

Amy Cohen Varela (00:40:26): It's hard to imagine someone with such absolutely constant, kind of driving curiosity about the world. And so earlier when you asked me about meaning, and I said it's about keeping on keeping on, or continuing to affirm. That's when this curiosity thing, I thought about Francisco. And he always said, "Keep the question open. Don't answer it. Don't answer it. Suspend the answer. Suspend the answer." And he was really a master at maintaining and nurturing his own curiosity. He wanted to always suspend.

(00:41:08) And so probably when I met him, although I perhaps don't have that curiosity to that same degree, there was a little bit of a sense of recognition. I felt like he certainly, and I in my own way, we were both re-"search"ers. And so it wasn't about really constructing a theoretical edifice that then we would attract people to come and be in. It was more about propulsing—I don't know if that's an English word or a French word, but—keeping the motion going, keeping the questioning going. Although I was much younger than he was, that was something that I recognized myself in. But he had it in spades.

(00:41:56) And so one of the most... and it seems like a kind of really general thing, but it's very potent when you're doing therapy, when you're doing particularly work like psychoanalytic therapy, which doesn't work with the same kind of tools or techniques that say cognitive behavioral does. It's much less directive. In therapy, basically you're working with the analyst's mind and the patient's mind. And so what's in that mind is really important, because there's not a third set of tools that you're applying. There's a framework, but it's at a distance from the actual work.

(00:42:34) So one of the things about Francisco that affected my mind was that, with this curiosity came this incredible openness. And he would really entertain just about any theory you could possibly... I mean, he listened to everything. Then of course he could be very critical. But he was one of the least dogmatic people that I'd ever met in my life. And I think probably it's still the case.

(00:43:01) And I was sort of dogmatic myself. I had this side. I don't think I was a certifiable dogmatist, but I had certain rigidities and certain sides of me where I wasn't going to let go of certain things, and this and that. And so being with him—and I think you didn't have to live with him or marry him to know this, many people who were friends or colleagues knew this—was that this hospitality that he had about ideas, and about what you had to say, really cultivated openness in his interlocutor.

(00:43:39) And so it allowed me to, this youthful dogmatism that I had, or rigidity that I had, it allowed me to kind of relax it and let it go. And so it didn't really change my work if you look at me working from the outside. But in terms of how I worked with people from the inside, it changed it radically. Because this relaxing of the mind and this opening of the mind by being in this 14-year conversation with this person who was so... really hospitable, kind of unconditional. "Say it. Don't worry about it." It changes the way you are, and the way you think. And it changes the way you listen to your patients in that situation. So in that sense, he was absolutely formative to my practice, but in an invisible kind of way. Certainly visible to my myself and my patients.

(00:44:39) And then the other thing is, that's maybe a little bit more concrete, is that it's very difficult in this psychoanalytic process to account for what happens. So this thing happens week after week between two people, and you have to write it up as a clinical account. What do you do? You start writing it up and you pull out the theoretical tools to put words on bits and pieces of the interaction. And all of a sudden, it sounds desiccated. That wasn't what the experience was. The experience was filled with juice, and this is dried out.

(00:45:19) So thinking about first and third as we talked about it, and thinking about what happens in between, in the enactive sense or in the participatory sense-making sense, has been helpful for me for writing about what happens without desiccating. What happens in the psychoanalytic experience without fossilizing it into theory.

(00:45:44) Francisco at one point or another called enaction constrained imagination. So constrained by your mind in our conversation, constrained by my mind in our conversation. But still something emerges between us. And in psychotherapy or in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, thinking about this constrained imagination—which is the same way of saying thinking about what we call the transference, which means the specific relationship that's established between me, Amy, in my role, and you, Wendy, in your role, that's different from any other. Bringing up that singularity. Thinking about, and reading people who are writing about specific situations—like Hanne De Jaegher writes beautifully about specific situations working with autistic people, working in couples, working... in her lovely article *Loving and Knowing*, where she equates loving and knowing.

(00:46:49) So all of these ideas allow you to give flesh to what's happening in this in between space, for example, between me and my patient. And so in that sense, it's enriched my thinking about how at least I can account for it in, say, a piece of writing. And also with the patient herself.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:47:12): Yeah. It's really interesting to think about all of the resonances between these spaces of work. And I guess it's not too surprising because it's all about working with minds and understanding minds, but from these different perspectives.

(00:47:29) Something I wonder about with psychotherapy, Western psychotherapeutic approaches and then thinking about Buddhist philosophy, is the approach to the self. And how that often feels, at least if I simplify it in my mind, it feels like quite a different approach. Where psychology tends to maybe contribute to the reification of the self and emphasize the development of a healthy self, and those kinds of things. Whereas Buddhism almost sometimes feels like it can dismiss all of that work, and just skip to the fact that the self is actually illusory or constructed, and we just need to move beyond that idea.

(00:48:16) So I'm wondering if you think about that... and maybe it doesn't come up so much, because you were saying in psychoanalysis, you are not providing your framework to the patient so much. But does that ever come up for you?

Amy Cohen Varela (00:48:33): Sure. I mean, the answer could be very long if we really went into the history of the ego in Western psychology. Because the ego is a contentious object depending on what of the myriad schools that you belong to.

(00:48:51) So to speak for myself, and for my practice, and for—even within psychoanalysis, there are many different schools, but—the type of psychoanalytic thinking that attracts me, that attracts my mind... (And I'm thinking not only about people like Freud, but also people like Jacques Lacan who's a French analyst, or D. W. Winnicott, or Jessica Benjamin. There are lots of interesting people from the past and more recent past who are thinking about all of this.) That distinction that you made between Buddhism and psychotherapy is not necessarily functional.

(00:49:34) I think that in the type of psychoanalytic thinking that I would say I could refer to or relate to the most, the idea of an analysis is a kind of an undoing of the ego. And so we could go into it theoretically, but to try to say something about it fairly succinctly, the ego would be kind of like an armor, like a suit of armor, that actually is constructed from useful identifications. "I'm going to be this way, I'm going to be that way." I mean, it's all unconscious until it's made conscious. And some of it can be. Some of it can't be, but some of it can be. And so what you want to do is undo it, sort of scale by scale. You know, in movies where they're wearing coats of armor, it's all these kind of... so you just let these scales drop off. That's sometimes the way I see it.

(00:50:30) But at the same time, and this is similar to a lot of Buddhist thinking on the relative and the absolute, you still need some of it to be functional. So in that sense, you can take some of it away or you can take some of it apart, and some of it has to stay. But what's really interesting is the experience of seeing that you can do it up and then undo it, and do it up and then undo it. So it's more like (again, coming back to enactment), it's more like a processual thing. It's more like a process that can get done and undone, and done again. And the experience of knowing that it's undoable and re-doable is really much closer to the notion of impermanence. Right?

(00:51:14) And so that's the way I think about it in psychotherapy; I know that many people would disagree. And it certainly, in psychotherapy, is absent the higher dimensions of spiritual attainment. I mean, that's not what psychotherapy is about. So whatever small understanding I have on that never enters my office in any way explicitly.

[\(00:51:38\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:52:11](#)): A lot of these topics that we're digging into are making me think of a piece from Varela, from the late '70s. And this is, I believe it was from the Lindisfarne Association, which we've talked about on the podcast in other episodes, but he was very much a part of that. And so this was one of the proceedings, I think, from that where he gave a talk at one of those meetings, that was reflections on the Chilean civil war, which you mentioned earlier was of course really formative for him.

[\(00:52:41\)](#) But the piece, which I'll include in the show notes, really struck me. It goes into a lot about polarization and the extreme polarization that the Chilean culture was experiencing at that time. And it feels so timely today. You and I were speaking before we started recording about the polarization that we are experiencing both in United States and in Europe.

[\(00:53:04\)](#) So it just feels so relevant. And he kind of unpacks how the development of these two extreme positions... each one feels so much that they are right and the other is wrong. And you kind of develop these completely alternate streams of narrative and reality. And he ends the piece by saying, or a lot of the piece is talking about, how that's basically an illusion, and the reality is that both of these positions have emerged in conversation with each other, and are based in this interconnected whole. And how we really need to somehow see that, and embrace that, and operate from that perspective, knowing that each somehow contains the other.

[\(00:53:54\)](#) So I just felt like that was such an important perspective. And I wonder if you have thoughts on that, and knowing him so well, or just maybe unpacking that a little bit more for us in the context of today's polarization.

Amy Cohen Varela ([00:54:11](#)): Wow, you just did an absolutely amazing off-the-cuff summary of that, of the end part of that paper, anyway. In the paper, it's really one of the only times in his career when he talks about what happened during the coup d'etat in Chile on September 11th, 1973. In fact, if people are interested, there is a recording of it that can be found. So you can actually hear him give the talk.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:54:42](#)): Oh, I would love to link to that, yeah.

Amy Cohen Varela ([00:54:44](#)): It's also really interesting to listen to. I think Evan Thompson, who was there at his dad's Lindisfarne, remembers that in fact, it was given without notes. In other words, he got up and in reaction to something that was happening, the person who was speaking before him, he started talking about this.

[\(00:55:09\)](#) So in the talk, he goes through a kind of very dramatic account, minute by minute, day by day of how it happened. And it was clearly a successful coup d'etat because everyone was surprised. And how he helped his wife and children go into hiding, or he found them a safe house. And then he went into hiding, because although he was not very, very close to Allende, he was involved with people who were very close to Allende. And the DINA, or the Secret Service, was picking people up and bringing them to torture houses, and this sort of thing. This is maybe September 12th, September 13th.

[\(00:55:50\)](#) And then at one point, he's sitting waiting in a house, and they can't move, and they can't go outside. There are many interesting points of this article, as a parenthesis, where he describes watching a young soldier in a tank go down the street shooting at people. And he said, "I was looking at his face

and he looked like a nice southern boy—maybe from Talcahuano, maybe from Concepcion, just this southern Chilean looking face—the kind of guy you'd go and have a beer with in a bar. But he's up there, and he (Varela) describes the mixture of power and fear in this young man's face with this gun in this tank.

(00:56:37) And so he goes into hiding with a group of people, and he's obviously under a whole lot of stress. And he describes having a moment of almost hallucination or psychosis, and he sits down and he writes a text called *The Logic of Paradise*, where he describes what you so beautifully summarized.

(00:56:57) So yeah, we talked a little bit about enaction and about self-reference. And how in order to be able to act in the world, you have to be able to see how you're participating in the actions that you're creating. And Francisco, there's a beautiful line in that text. I can't remember it exactly, but he says something like, "The only way you can get out of this kind of situation is for both sides to have the capacity to undo themselves."

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:57:28): Yes. That was the line that struck me. It just stopped me in my tracks. I was like, "Whoa." I think the line was a part at the very end, he says, "I don't believe anymore in the notion of a cultural revolution in the sense that one form of politics, and knowledge, and religion is superseded by a new one. If I'm interested in doing anything at this point, it is in creating a form of culture, knowledge, religion, or politics that does not view itself as replacing another in any sense. But one that can contain in itself a way of undoing itself."

Amy Cohen Varela (00:58:02): A way of undoing itself.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:58:03): Yeah. It's really powerful.

Amy Cohen Varela (00:58:05): Yeah. It is very powerful—because it's powerful in the contemplative sense, but it's also powerful as an epistemology. That was how, when I read that... in fact Francisco gave that article to me... He wrote it in '79. I met him in '86. We talked somewhat about the coup d'etat, but it was like four or five years afterwards that he gave me that article. And I, and I think many people, are struck by that line. It was through that I understood what enaction was about. Undoing is sort of the theme because the missing link was my own experience in analysis—of doing and undoing.

(00:58:46) And so there's a real link there between something I could understand because I'd experienced, it in my experience if you will, in watching myself experience things in analysis. This undoing process. This unlearning, undoing, getting away from it, moving around it, seeing another side, all that. And when I read that line—boom! Even though I'd already read *The Embodied Mind* (because I was reading the early drafts of *The Embodied Mind* before it came out)... Didn't get it, didn't get it. He gave me that article and I was like, "Oh, I get it!" Because of that line.

(00:59:19) So polarization is when we are convinced that we are objectively right. That is, our minds are creating a reality that is in fact objectively existing, and is objectively correct. And so this idea of self-reference, the way you put it, you have to come to a kind of meta-understanding, a meta-level of understanding in order to surmount this polarization. Self-reference is a way of—and this is all about this kind of reflexiveness that you find in enaction—self-reference is the capacity to be able to look and see how what you are doing is creating things in the world. So that's enaction. But to be able to be aware, to become aware of how your being is actually a doing, and a doing that is creating a reality.

(01:00:19) So when two sides of a polarization, as you put it so beautifully, side A and side B decide that "A world" is objectively true, and "B world" is objectively true—it's interesting, because there's no conversation, but it's a co-creation. So that's what Francisco's describing took place in Chile at that moment, where the two sides were creating realities against each other. One could put it that way. And that seems to be what's happening in the United States now, in general, but if you just look at the abortion issue—the way the reality is being created on both sides of that issue, you can see that it's a similar kind of co-creation. But a co-creation that precludes conversation. And in fact, in the article, Francisco says that's what psychosis is, is when there's two symbolic systems functioning that are two different symbolic systems, so that they cannot actually communicate. They're meaningless to one another, absolutely meaningless. And that's what real polarization is. When it's not even a question of misunderstanding. It's a question of meaninglessness. Or, like when the proceeding president was president, and they were talking about "alternative facts." This is another world.

(01:01:44) And so Francisco says in that article that the only way you can stop that kind of escalation of development of polarized realities that are not in conversation is by acknowledging your participation in the creation of those realities, and working on yourself. And the way he chose to do that was through a contemplative practice. Through a lot of other things too. But in that paper, that's what he states. And it certainly was central to his life. But the point is, the only way to get to a kind of meta-level you mentioned, where we can bring the conversation back, is that all the protagonists in this polarization recognize that it's not objective. That they're reflexively involved in the construction of this. And so they have to work on themselves.

(01:02:39) And so that means yes, having that reflexive capacity to be able to pull the armor off, to use my psychoanalytic metaphor. But above all, to become aware of your participation in the construction of this reality. And that's the big problem with objective thinking, and with the hegemony of objective thinking. It deprives itself of the power of the subjective participation. And it gains another kind of power, but socially, and psychologically I would say, and even in terms of the kinds of meanings we can make in this world, it's definitely not enough.

(01:03:22) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:03:50): I wanted to wrap up just with allowing you the chance to talk about your work through Mind & Life Europe. This is the sister organization to Mind & Life in the US. Do you want to talk about the programs that are most poignant to you right now, or some of the latest activities?

Amy Cohen Varela (01:04:09): I would love to talk to you just a little bit about Core Enaction.

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:04:14): Yes, that would be great.

Amy Cohen Varela (01:04:16): So Mind & Life Europe, yes, the sister organization of Mind & Life Institute. And we've been running for a number of years since 2012, approximately.

(01:04:26) And in 2021, we had a very special year, because it was the 20th anniversary of Francisco Varela's passing. And it was the 30th anniversary of the publication of *The Embodied Mind* that Francisco wrote with Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch. And so during that time, we had a great series. We had a couple of great series—one was a series called *Francisco and Friends*, where we brought in a lot of people who spoke about bringing subjective and objective together, people who did science with him or did philosophy with him, but also had personal relationships. And we encouraged people to talk

about their relationship with him, and the evolution of their work, and their friendships together. So Francisco and Friends, and they're on our Mind & Life Europe YouTube channel.

[\(01:05:15\)](#) And we also did a series that was more directed towards philosophers, but also to a general audience, called Ouroboros. The ouroboros being the snake that bites its own tail and creates a perfect circle. And there, we had a whole group of people, both scientists, cognitive scientists, neurobiologists, philosophers, at each session choosing and reading for us one text of Francisco's. So not reading the text, but doing a critical reading and having a discussion.

[\(01:05:50\)](#) And during those two programs, we realized that people were really very, very enthusiastic about the paradigm of enaction. And we at Mind & Life Europe find this paradigm interesting scientifically, interesting philosophically, even interesting contemplatively, but also really, really interesting as kind of a guideline or maybe even a mantra for the way we work together, in terms of thinking about what we're doing as we are doing it.

[\(01:06:20\)](#) And so we got a lot of requests for more information about enaction. So we set up a program called Core Enaction, and it's going to run for four semesters. The first semester is called Genealogy. So it's all of the historical background whence came enaction. And that includes cybernetics, and autopoiesis, and autonomy. So historical background of enaction might sound dry, but it's really very, very exciting, because it's all of systems theory that runs into the '70s, into what has been called the systems counterculture.

[\(01:07:01\)](#) So all of this theory that came from cybernetics was then translated through people like Stuart Brand, through people like William Irwin Thompson, John Lilly, Heinz von Foerster in the middle of the hippest period, the late '60s, early '70s. And that was key when Francisco was young, he was in the middle of that. And Bateson as well. These were counterculture guys. So it's actually very juicy material. And so that's the first chapter. That's Genealogy. Second chapter and third chapter are going to be actually a close reading of The Embodied Mind. Each meeting, including for Genealogy, we have guest speakers who come in and speak about what's really inspiring them about this aspect or that aspect of the history. And then for The Embodied Mind, we'll do a longer reading with a lot of invited guests.

[\(01:08:00\)](#) And then the final semester, which will be in spring 2024, will be the future of the Embodied Mind. So we're bringing in all of the interesting people, generally younger, who are doing interesting work with enaction, participatory sense-making, all of these areas that are looking to apply enaction in practical situations. Including working with for example in pedagogy, in teaching. Enaction in teaching.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(01:08:33\)](#): Wonderful. For folks who might be listening to this in the future, will these be recorded and be able to be followed down the line?

Amy Cohen Varela [\(01:08:42\)](#): Yes. They're all recorded and they're all on the Mind & Life Europe YouTube channel. So we're very excited about it because it's actually the first time Mind & Life Europe has tried to do... we have wonderful talks and they're all available, but they're kind of one-offs, even though we have thematic series. This is the first time we really would like to build something, that isn't heavy, but we hope will make a real contribution to understanding what this really revolutionary alternative way of thinking about mind, what it consists of.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:09:19](#)): Yeah. That's great. I think that will reach so many. I'm excited to tune in too.

Amy Cohen Varela ([01:09:23](#)): Yeah, you should come and see us.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:09:26](#)): Yeah, I would love to. Well, thank you so much for this conversation. It's been a real joy. Thank you for all that you're doing in the world, for continuing Francisco's legacy. And thanks for taking the time today.

Amy Cohen Varela ([01:09:41](#)): It's always interesting to talk about this material, and your questions have been fantastic. It's interesting to see also what emerges from a relationship, isn't it?

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:09:51](#)): Yes, between us. It's wonderful.

Amy Cohen Varela ([01:09:53](#)): Thank you.

Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:09:59](#)): *This episode was edited and produced by me and Phil Walker, and music on the show is from Blue Dot Sessions and Universal. Show notes and resources for this and other episodes can be found at podcast.mindandlife.org. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts, and share it with a friend. And if something in this conversation sparked insight for you, let us know. You can send an email or voice memo to podcast@mindandlife.org.*

(01:10:29) *Mind & Life is a production of the Mind & Life Institute. Visit us at mindandlife.org where you can learn more about how we bridge science and contemplative wisdom to foster insight and inspire action towards flourishing. If you value these conversations, please consider supporting the show. You can make a donation at mindandlife.org, under Support. Any amount is so appreciated, and it really helps us create this show. Thank you for listening.*