



MIND & LIFE

## Mind & Life Podcast Transcript

### Hanne De Jaegher – Making Sense Together

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**Opening Quote – Hanne De Jaegher (00:03):** *Differences between us that are sometimes visible and sometimes not, but which we often use to immediately make boundaries between us or set people apart... that needs to change. And I think in the autism communities, this is changing much on the basis of autistic people more strongly speaking, and showing that their ways of interacting are actually very sensitive in their own ways. So non-autistic people are increasingly called upon to think, "Actually this different way of interacting is equally valid, and maybe I need to adjust rather than make the autistic person assimilate to neurotypical ways of doing things."*

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**Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:45):** Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. My guest today is philosopher and cognitive scientist Hanne De Jaegher. Hanne is a leading thinker in the enactive approach to cognition (which we've talked about in several previous episodes), and she's been working to extend those theories into the social domain, to understand how we think, work, and play—together. Her ideas lift up how social interaction is central to the way our minds work. And I think through this, she's giving us another lens on interconnection.

(01:22) Hanne is such a careful and clear thinker, and I love how she doesn't shy away from nuance. In fact, she embraces it. She highlights how relationships are naturally full of tensions, and leans into that complexity to give us a better understanding of how we can know and love one another more fully, and communicate across differences. She's also moving her work beyond theory and into some really important applications, including neurodiversity and autism, which we get into more in today's show.

(01:56) If you're interested in Hanne's work, please check the show notes. There's lots there, including some excellent lectures that dive deeper into her ideas. And if you'd like to learn more about some of the broader concepts in this conversation, you might enjoy checking out some past episodes like with Evan Thompson, Amy Cohen Varela, Roshi Joan Halifax, and Andreas Roepstorff. OK if you can, settle in somewhere cozy and listen to this one. I loved this conversation; I found it really rich. I hope you do too. I'm so happy to share with you Hanne De Jaegher.

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**Wendy Hasenkamp (02:34):** Well, it's my great pleasure to welcome Hanne De Jaegher to the show. Hanne, thank you so much for joining us.

**Hanne De Jaegher (02:40):** Thank you. I'm really glad to be here.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (02:42):** So I've been diving into your work, and I'm very excited to chat about a lot of these different aspects. You are a philosopher of cognitive science, but first I'd love to hear a little bit about how you got into doing this work. What drew you to philosophy and the cognitive science area? And then I know your work has been really influenced by Francisco Varela as well, and so maybe how you came across all of that.

**Hanne De Jaegher (03:07):** Yeah. So it starts quite early. I think as a young child, I was interested in thinking, what thinking is, and how people behave, and how people do what they do. I remember as a young girl in the car with my parents, mainly in the car somehow, having these reflections with them. They would also tell me later on that I would lean forward in between their seats in the car and go, "Do you know what I think?" And then I would start a story or some thought, and then we would have a reflection together about it. And it wasn't just thinking about things, but also thinking about thinking. That was already there from a very young age.

(03:56) And my dad was a psychologist. And my mom, she taught literacy to children who didn't have literacy—in Belgium, it's called alphabetizing, so it's teaching children to read who don't have access to... And also even adults. She did that with adults as well. And both my parents at some point when I was a young child, specialized in autism, working with autistic people. And my dad as a psychologist, also when I was a young child, specialized in systemic psychotherapy. And so he went to an academy in Antwerp two days a week, which was quite an event because it was a bit far away. And so he went there and he was away for the long day from home. And this academy is called the Interaction Academy, the Interactie-Academie, and they taught the work of Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana there. And so he brought these ideas home and he was very enthusiastic about it. And we talked about systemic things since I was a kid, over dinner.

(05:01) And also about what the autistic children in their care did. You know, when they were talking about the people that they were working with, always the approach was to understand it from the point of view of the person. Or if the child did some strange behavior (supposedly strange behavior), the intention was always, what does that behavior mean for this child? And why is it like that? From that perspective, rather than having some kind of preconceived idea of, "It's that behavior and it needs to be treated away," or something like that. No, it was always why is that there, and what is the context? What went before? What helps to make it better for the person? And so those kinds of conversations were there since I was a young kid.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (05:49):** Yeah, wow. That makes a lot of sense then, how you've gotten into all of the work that you have. So that's interesting that you were raised already with that perspective of viewing people's behavior from their own side, from their own experience. I've heard you speak about, as a philosopher of cognitive science... Which it might be interesting for the audience just to hear what that actually means. I'm presuming it means you look at how cognitive science approaches what it does. But yeah, so the critiques or the perspective that you see there, and some of the problems that can cause.

**Hanne De Jaegher (06:28):** Yeah. So when I studied philosophy in Brussels, my undergrad and my license degree, which is the equivalent to a Masters, were in philosophy in Brussels. And in the thesis I wrote there, I already took the perspective of a philosopher looking at cognitive science. So I looked at artificial intelligence, and already also, because I went to that academy where my dad studied... So it's not an academic academy, they train psychotherapists. But I went there because they had a copy of *The Tree of Knowledge*—Maturana and Varela's book—that otherwise I couldn't get a copy of. It wasn't in the

university library. So I went there to look at that, and that was in my thesis. And also, autistic thinking already was in my thesis there as well.

[\(07:15\)](#) So yeah, philosophy of cognitive science is thinking as a philosopher about, for instance, what artificial intelligence can tell us about thinking, and about behaving, and about intelligence. And also really thinking about what it is to be human by, for instance, looking at psychological theories of autism. There was a tension in a way already between how my father approached this by looking at it from the autistic person's perspective, and what the theories were doing, because the psychological theories of autism were very much imposing their theoretical framework on autism, without actually looking at autistic people as they were behaving, what they were doing in real life.

[\(08:00\)](#) So I noticed, for instance, one thing that autistic people tend to do, I put a little note on my wall, "rhythmic behavior." So this rocking in a chair for instance, or looking through their hands while they're flapping, at something, looked to me like rhythmic behavior. But I didn't really find it in the theories. And so I was wondering about how does that go together, these psychological theories, which are all about what's going on in the head, and how the brain is calculating things to say it very quickly. And how that goes together with autistic people in real life. There were tensions and questions there. And so those I started to investigate in my PhD at the University of Sussex. So that was kind of the kernel or the basis of my PhD research.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** [\(08:47\)](#): Yeah. I want to get to all of your perspectives on autism and your work now that you're doing with the autistic community. But first, maybe it would help to build a number of different theories that your work is based on, and that you've developed. Does it make sense to start with enactive theory and Varela's work, and sensemaking as a concept? I think that could be helpful for the audience to hear more about.

**Hanne De Jaegher** [\(09:16\)](#): So yeah, my work starts in sensemaking, in some sense. *[laughter]* So at Sussex, we looked a lot at embodied theories in general. So not just how the brain is computing things about the world, but rather how we as whole bodies move around in the world and how our bodies understand things.

[\(09:37\)](#) So when I, for instance, take my cup of tea here in front of me to drink from it, that is a different intentionality, and I move differently than if I want to put the cup of tea aside because I want to start writing something in my notepad that's in front of it, or something like that. And that different intentionality in my bodily movement is also visible. If you were to be able to see it, you would see that from the beginning, even if maybe you don't realize it, but your body would react to it in the way you understand it, bodily from the first moment.

[\(10:11\)](#) And so that bodily moving is actually how we understand the world. That is something our body does, more than our brain. And of course, our brain is part of that, but it's mainly also in the kinetics of how we move. The meaning is already there. And so that was important to begin with.

[\(10:29\)](#) But then sensemaking, the concept of sensemaking as developed by Varela and Evan Thompson and Ezequiel Di Paolo is, how that is the case because we are engaged with the things that we do, and see, and find in the world out of a necessity of maintaining our own living organization as human beings. And so that makes things relevant for us in the world. So the cup of tea is relevant when I am thirsty. And then I attend to it in this particular way for getting a drink from it. And that really runs through my whole way of moving with it. And that is all to do with my self-maintaining at this metabolic level of needing some food, or nutrition, or something like that.

(11:14) So sensemaking, because of that necessity and how we maintain ourselves as living beings, gives a perspective on the world of things that are relevant, that are good, or to be avoided for our self-maintenance. And we don't only do that metabolically, but also in sensorimotor terms. So I like to move a lot, I guess, when I speak. Maybe not so much as other people, but I do notice that I like to use my hands. And so these are sensorimotor self-maintenances as well. So we have habits of moving, which Ezequiel has written about in his book *Sensorimotor Life*, where we maintain ways of moving, also sensorimotorically that are then difficult to change. So it's a kind of autonomous organization as well, that self maintains.

(11:58) And we also do that socially, the self maintenance. In the social realm, we maintain identity. So the way I speak here is different than when I speak to my sister, or to my husband. We maintain different kinds of linguistic and social identities for which we do certain things. We speak in certain ways here different than in other contexts. And that's all related to that sensemaking and self maintenance, and what is relevant to us, and how we do things. So that self maintenance runs through all of our ways of behaving and all of our cognition, and that's what sensemaking is.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (12:35): Yeah. Is it also... Sometimes I get stuck on the word "sense," in the terms of making sense of the world. So... [laughter] I was going to say, "that totally makes sense," what you just said about movement and maintaining our organism, and our self-organization. And these different roles and identities and ways that we do that in different contexts. And is there also a piece that then, all of that behavior, and I guess does perception also play in there? About how we perceive the world, and that's probably an iterative system depending on our goals and all of that... I'm thinking about the way that our minds, or mindbody systems, are trying to construct a "model of the world" is sometimes how it's talked about in cognitive science. Is that part of the making sense, of having a construct that then we can use to understand the world and how we engage with it?

**Hanne De Jaegher** (13:39): Yeah, that's a really good question. I mean, let me try to answer all the different parts of it, because there's a lot in the question. So you started with asking about sense, like 'making sense' in the ordinary language kind of way in which we use it. So something makes sense, indeed I think you're right, that it makes sense when it fits a model that we have, or a thought, or a template, or a previous understanding that we already have. So that's the very high level, one very high level form of making sense of something.

(14:12) But it goes all the way back to sense. And sense contains both our senses—tasting, smelling, hearing, seeing. Even our touch sense and maybe also other senses. I think our bodies are sensitive in different ways, than those five senses as well. But that word "sense" connects those bodily sensitivities to these very high level human forms of sensemaking, making sense of things.

(14:41) And that whole spectrum... Or spectrum is maybe a little bit too dry. It's a very rich tapestry of the way our body connects to the world. And so our senses and how we relate through our senses to the world, and this high level sensemaking are completely connected and they run through each other for human beings. But one element in the enactive approach as well is that sense for even minimal living beings—like I see a beautiful picture of a tree behind you—trees and plants are also sensitive to the world. And so this sense, self-organization sense for minimal living beings is already there.

(15:24) But then to get to human level sensemaking, or something making sense and how that relates to maybe our model of the world or pre-understanding that we have of the world, a lot happens in

between that "low level" sensemaking. I actually don't like to speak about it like that, because it's so complex and rich already. But the connection between those two ends, in a way, is very rich and full.

(15:54) And as human beings, and also animals do that I think, [we] have lots of experiences that form sort of grooves through which they are habituated to interact, or they are used to interacting with the world. And so Ezequiel called these "grooves" a long time ago, but it's an interesting way to speak about it, that the way we often interact with the world makes it so that certain things become used to us interacting in that way. I think what happens is that we often interact with things—again, and again, and again, of course. We do things habitually, so there are these often occurring similar dynamics of interacting with the world, and also often occurring similar experiences that we have. And they're always different, because of course the world never repeats itself, but they're also similar enough so that we get used to ways of interacting.

(16:47) And then when we do something again that we have done before, and it doesn't quite fit—then you can speak about it in terms of a model that we have, but I would say it's more like an experience that we have, or a pattern that's usual for us. Either [it] can continue as it always happens, and then it fits the model in a way, or it is different this time, and then we have to adjust what we thought about it before. And so in a way the model doesn't fit, but it also means we now have to move differently on all these different levels with this thing that we're trying to understand.

(17:21) – *musical interlude* –

**Wendy Hasenkamp (17:46):** So you've contributed a lot to this theory, and bringing it to another level of sensemaking, which you call participatory sensemaking, so involving more of an interaction between people. Do you want to give an overview of how that works?

**Hanne De Jaegher (18:01):** Yes. So participatory sensemaking starts from two pillars. I mean it's part of my PhD thesis, but it came out a lot also out of my work with Ezequiel Di Paolo. So participatory sensemaking is in contrast to previous theories of social cognition, which looked at how we individually figure out what another person is doing, and try to explain and predict their behavior. Participatory sensemaking looks at intersubjectivity, so how we make meaning together in the widest possible sense, in order to try to capture all of what we do socially with each other. Not so much to be like an extremely wide-ranging theory or something like that, but to make sure that we have enough of a view of all of the phenomenon to capture really what's going on at the levels of experience, and cognition, and all of those things.

(18:51) But the two basic pillars of participatory sensemaking, if you like, the equally important starting points are first, that we are these sense makers who interact with the world in terms of what we need and the constraints that we have on the basis of our bodies as self-organizing systems. So we engage with concern for the world.

(19:10) And the other pillar is that interactions... So when we do something together, anything, whether it's gardening, or cooking something, or dancing, or having a conversation, an emergent process happens between us and a dance kind of emerges between us. And that dance itself also has a certain autonomy or a life of its own, and can pull us in in certain ways, or push us out in certain ways. So it has its own kind of effectiveness in how we interact with each other and how we understand each other.

(19:41) So it's not just this one sensemaker over against another one, and we meet each other and we are different. That is already very complex. But then also, what happens in between us does things with

each of us. We become participants in an interactive process. And that's also something that we contend with in a way. It can lead to particular tensions for instance.

[\(20:07\)](#) Maybe to illustrate it, if you have an ongoing difficulty with a family member for instance, from a long history, it happens perhaps that even if you decide this time for Christmas or Thanksgiving dinner, not to fight, this pattern that you're in for so long may just take over, even against your individual intentions. Even if both of you know that individually, this time you said really it's not going to happen. Still, the interactive pattern can be so strong that it pulls you up into this well-known dynamic. And this illustrates the power of these interactive dynamics.

[\(20:42\)](#) And sometimes it's that strong, but I think in general it's always playing a role. Not always that strong, but it's always also influencing us. And so these are the basic elements of participatory sensemaking theory.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** [\(20:56\)](#): Yeah, thank you. That's a really helpful example about interpersonal dynamics or someone that you have struggles with, because to me at least, it really shows when you both are kind of sucked back into that dynamic, it's not necessarily anything that's happening inside either one of the two people separately. It's the dynamic between them. So I see what you mean by that dynamic has a life of its own, in a way. It's really interesting to think about that way.

**Hanne De Jaegher** [\(21:27\)](#): Yeah, and I think sometimes, we are often not aware of it. So one of the things I want to do at participatory sensemaking is to help people understand that, and maybe first of all see that that's going on, and then to understand it. We have lots of conceptual ways of helping people understand that. And then also, I think experientially, it's something that we can relate to. So participatory sensemaking is in a way, a scientific way to capture that. But also, I'm interested now in going into the world and seeing how that can make a difference to people's lives as well.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** [\(22:03\)](#): Yeah. I know you have some examples of how you've been applying this in different settings. Do you want to share some of those?

**Hanne De Jaegher** [\(22:11\)](#): Yeah. Since the beginning of doing this work, and since my childhood, as I said, I was involved with autistic children and autistic people. They were in my life for a long time. So especially in relation to autistic people, this plays out a lot, because people have such different ways of coordinating with themselves, and also coordinating with other people. And autistic people I think have some kind of bodily differences in their own rhythms of moving and interacting from neurotypical or allistic people, non-autistic people. And so this sometimes clashes in terms of these different rhythms of moving, and then what interaction processes do or cannot do with those. And so interacting with autistic people and understanding autism has been for a long time, one way of figuring this out in the real world, so to speak. From academia, that looks like the real world. But now I think they are much more closely interlocking.

[\(23:13\)](#) In recent years, more and more autistic people and autistic researchers are not satisfied anymore with being determined by cognitivist theories, which set them apart as socially incapable. You know, they couldn't do social cognition as the theories prescribed it. But now, more and more autistic people are speaking, and part of the academic, and the research participation, and making theories, and designing research, and showing that their ways of interacting are actually very sensitive in their own ways. And so now we have to contend with that, I think.



(23:52) But it also becomes easier to bridge gaps between allistic or non-autistic understanding and autistic understanding, if we can listen better to each other and realize that differences are going in both directions. So non-autistic people are increasingly called upon to think, "Actually, this different way of interacting is an equally valid way of interacting. And maybe, I need to adjust rather than make the autistic person assimilate to neurotypical ways of doing things."

(24:21) And as I speak, I realize that I'm making this big distinction as if we are so different, but I actually don't really think we are that different. And there are big differences and at the same time not, I think.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (24:33):** Yeah, I appreciate that. It speaks to the ways that certainly Western science tends to categorize and make these groupings and labels. And then that kind of reminds me, you started to talk about the way that cognitive science determines people in that way of labels, and groups, and reified constructs around them. It's making me think of work that you've done around loving and knowing, where you've talked about over- and underdetermining people. So how do you use the term loving? Because I know it's pretty specific in the way that you conceive of it.

**Hanne De Jaegher (25:11):** Yeah. So at some point I started, through different readings and thinking, to think that maybe participatory sensemaking theory needed some kind of deepening, because it can be considered, in a way, fairly mechanistically if it's only about the dynamics. So the dynamics of self-organization of individuals, and the dynamics of self-organization of the interaction, and how they relate to each other. So that remains on a kind of mechanistic level in science, in scientific terms.

(25:39) But I think one really important element of participatory sensemaking and the work it can do is how we experience that. So these dynamics, we all, I think know from experience in our loving relationships. So we know in loving relationships that there are tensions between being yourself and being in relation. So with friends or with lovers, or with parents and children, you have your own existence that you're taking care of, but you can get into existential quandaries with other people when their wishes go against yours, or when the way you relate to each other pulls you in directions that aren't right. All kinds of tensions arise in loving relationships all the time.

(26:25) And so that's what I think about when I talk about loving and knowing, and saying that loving and knowing are the same is, on the one hand trying to get an understanding of how we know that is closely related to our bodily experience as human, living, breathing beings. And we know that kind of tension in loving. So it's an experiential invitation in a way, to understand what knowing is on the basis of these tensions and these dialectics between yourself and the world. And on the other hand, yeah, I think that conceptually we can get an understanding of what knowing is by understanding these tensions as again, maybe dynamics between your own self-maintenance and what you encounter as you interact with the world.

(27:10) And then in relation to under- and overdetermining, I think it's really strong... this being in the academic research world and also having autistic friends, and this intervention or the transgression of each other with these different ways of being that we live together. And so these loving relations are actually always an ongoing balancing in our engagement with each other between under- and overdetermining. So we cannot avoid as human beings making sense of things, as you said earlier. So having these kinds of models or habitual ways of doing things that fit or not what we encounter in the world. But this kind of model speak if you like is sort of static, like we have a model and then if it bumps into problems, we need to change the model or we need to change our interaction.

(28:03) But I think speaking in terms of loving and knowing and under- and overdetermination, is like an invitation to think in terms of ongoing becoming of each us and the world as we engage with it. And so under- and over-determination is this tension between I have an idea or a way of doing things that I'm used to, and I put that on what I encounter. So I determine something that I encounter in a particular way, and thereby overdetermine it. And it cannot be itself, or the person that I'm with or meeting cannot be itself because I have too much of an idea that I put on them, and so I overdetermine them. And then this dialogue between us can be restricted, because of my own overarching idea.

(28:52) So that's something that we cannot avoid doing and it's normal. But as we become aware of it, we can begin to change it, or make it not so strong, or recognize it when it's happening, and then think about what that tells us about how we are understanding something.

(29:09) And the other direction of that is underdetermining where, for instance, I meet someone or I'm doing something with someone. And I have too much respect for them, for instance, and they're doing something that I really don't understand. And I just let it completely be to such an extent that I am not even engaging with them anymore. And that's also, of course, a way of not engaging. Eventually if you take that to its logical conclusion, you would stop interaction, or stop engaging with the person. And that is also problematic, but it's also logical that we do that. I mean, it's something that is normal that we do. But as soon as we become aware of that, yeah again, we can do something different with it as we see it. I realize I'm talking in a very abstract way actually *[laughter]* about these things.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (30:01):** It's making sense to me. I like this idea of projecting. I think we all have that experience, where we project our ideas about a person into an interaction, and it shapes the interaction for sure. Or you can just leave a person be so much, that you're not even engaging with them at all. So I think that's what I hear you saying about this tension between letting be... You've talked about this idea of 'letting be' of a person. That's interesting to me too.

**Hanne De Jaegher (30:35):** Yes. Yeah, the idea of letting be is really about this tension between each of our ongoing becoming and being, where it needs to be so that we each can keep becoming as we are. But unavoidably, we will have an impact on each other, and transgress each other, and stop each other from becoming in certain ways—just by being ourselves.

(30:59) I'm going to try and give an example of this, because it's very abstract. So one of the things I've thought about in relation to this, and also written about, is ways of understanding what goes on in the development of dementia. One of them in more traditional psychological theories is that people living with dementia lose their emotional capacities. And the reason for thinking that is that when they are given tests in which they have to categorize pictures of people showing certain emotions, they become less and less able to do that. So they can't do this categorizing of emotions anymore. And then the conclusion out of that is that if they cannot categorize pictures of different emotions, according to the theory behind it, this is actually losing emotional capacities. Which I think is an enormous jump, but that's what is behind some psychological theories of emotion, that it's about categorizing. Then people living with dementia are losing that capacity.

(32:01) And if that is the idea, and that's communicated by, for instance, a care worker or a medical doctor to the family of a person with dementia... So the person is losing their emotional capacities—on the basis of this categorization trick, if you like, that they can't do anymore. But you communicate that to a family, and they take it seriously, because you're the doctor explaining this. Then they think my parent, or my sibling, or someone, a person I care about isn't emotionally capable anymore. And so you start treating them like that.



(32:33) And so this overdetermination of the person in that way through an abstract or a sort of objectivized theory puts the person apart from their family. It has a direct influence in the world. But when you know a person with dementia closely and you are attentive to the emotional relation, it's fully there. The emotional connection can be very strong, even though you cannot express it in words, even though it's not anything to do with categorizing. It's just usually doing things together and noticing the sensitivity of the person, for instance.

(33:08) I mean this happened to my father. He had dementia, early onset dementia. And one of the things we liked to do was sit in the garden, and look at the birds, and just enjoy that. And that is something without words, you can see it in each other's faces when you make eye contact. And that was a very strong emotional connection actually. And also, he was very sensitive to how the different nurses who came in the house to care for him were treating him. So some of them were more mechanical—maybe they were tired, or they had had a difficult day, or it was just their style—and he noticed that and reacted against it, and that made the interaction yet more difficult between them. So he was fully participating in that, and making that happen. But there was one nurse in particular who was very sensitive and they got along well. And those interactions went well, even when they were about difficult things. So my father was fully aware of that, and participating in it, and making these differences happen as well as he did them.

(34:10) So the idea behind understanding this over- and underdetermining is also that it makes a difference in real life for people. So there's a certain ethics about it as well, I think, in terms of what kinds of theories we make in cognitive science and in philosophy, and how they impact everyday life for everyone.

(34:29) – *musical interlude* –

**Wendy Hasenkamp (34:30):** I love that you just brought up ethics, and I know that's been a throughline in your work, that you've been thinking about. And part of what you were just saying was making me think a lot about social justice movements and prejudices that we have—maybe not even about a certain individual person, but about groups of people. So it can apply in the same ways. Is there anything you want to share about the implications of these ideas for that space?

**Hanne De Jaegher (35:25):** Yes. I can really only speak for my interactions in the autistic world, because that's where I have experience. But yes, we need to make that change of understanding that we are all ongoingly being ourselves and becoming together, and that differences between us that are sometimes visible and sometimes not, but which we often use to immediately make boundaries between us or set people apart, and then not question it, that that needs to change. Of course, obviously. I mean, we all know it, and yet it's so difficult.

(36:05) And I think in the autism communities of autistic researchers, this is changing much on the basis of autistic people more strongly speaking and saying, "Hey, we're here. We know and think in these ways, and listen to us. We are fully living beings with our whole views on the world and ways of interacting, and it's time to listen." To me, this time to listen is something really important.

(36:36) I'm working here in Canada now also looking at, for instance, relations between First Nations and Canadian government and settlers, and all of that. I can't say much about it because I haven't studied it enough, and don't have enough experience with actual people. But I think some similar dynamics are going on where, if you take participatory sensemaking theory seriously... I think because

the conflict of people not having been heard for so long and there being such a history of violence and mistrust, we are now at a point where it's really time for people who are used to being in dominant positions to listen. And that's what is being asked by people in dominated histories. They ask it. And there's a point where we have to be silent actually, for a while. I think then later, we will go onto a different dynamic and interact with each other again. But there's a point also in being silent with each other.

(37:40) And actually, I do some work with an autistic social enterprise from the UK, and we facilitate and organize dialogues according to the professional dialogue model developed in the US. And in these dialogues that we have between autistic people, family members, friends, also researchers, one of the things that comes out from the very act of dialoguing with each other is this importance of silence in the dialogue. So when we are together in a circle—that was for me, one of the strongest things that came out—is that for autistic people, it's important, this silence. Not just as part of listening, but also as part of processing. So while you're dialoguing, while you're speaking, listening can help everybody understand what's going on, or silence can help everybody have a different kind of connection with what's going on.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (38:38):** That's so interesting too, because I feel like in so many cultures, silence is uncomfortable. And a lot of people feel the need to fill it, because it makes them uncomfortable. But yeah, I really appreciate that perspective of the need for silence, certainly for some people to be able to process more of what's happening and then be able to contribute.

**Hanne De Jaegher (39:04):** Yes. And when people notice that for themselves, it may be that other people who didn't think they needed that also benefit from it.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (39:12):** Yeah. When you were speaking about your work with First Nations and Indigenous communities as another example of people who haven't been heard, and who've been repressed, and who've been overdetermined in many violent ways often, it made me think about... I've heard you talk about the social interaction that you're speaking about in participatory sensemaking—when it breaks down, it can actually be helpful, because it pushes both sides to come to a new understanding. I'm wondering if that's kind of part of what we're experiencing on a lot of levels in the world right now.

**Hanne De Jaegher (39:54):** Yes, I think so. I think all humans are used to conflict and tension in interactions from when we are young. I mean, it's unavoidable. Being born, growing up as a child of parents with siblings, being parents of children, you know, conflict and tension and difficulty is unavoidable, and it's always there, and we live through it. And so it's part of life, and it's normal.

(40:23) But at the same time, I think at a societal level, there are all kinds of things (like social media) that make this capacity that we have to live through conflict and tension, and breakdowns in interaction almost impossible. The complexity and the dynamics of what we know in daily life on a world stage is taken away, or reduced to often one person voicing their opinion—on Twitter, say, or on any of the other platforms. And one person voices their opinion that is often put in such a way as to invite clashing ideas. And the clashing ideas come, and there's no dynamic of interaction. It's just opinion, against opinion, against opinion, against opinion. And it's just slamming each other all the time.

(41:16) And this is invited by these systems, and we have no choice but to participate in them in that way, because they're set up in that way. So there's a dynamic of interaction that's invited. We are pulled into it. And even though we individually know this isn't right, I want to do it differently. There's a lot

more sensitivity and care in what each of us are concerned with. And yet, that's impossible to bring out on this world stage in a way, or in social media. And that's extremely damaging.

(41:44) And we lose this capacity—maybe, I don't know if it's true, but I suppose that these interactive dynamics become reduced. It's dangerous also for our everyday social lives. But we do have that capacity, and we do have that experience, and we do have that expertise. All of us as human beings, we are all intersubjective experts. And this kind of expertise I would like to contribute to giving more trust and confidence to for all of us.

(42:14) So this element of groups of people who have not been heard now speaking up, and demanding that others listen, and shut up while they listen—and this may take a while, it may take years. But then if there's been enough listening, and some of the dynamics of trust have been regained, and some of the violence is enough out of these interactions, then the dialogue will again pick up and become nuanced. Maybe it's a simplistic take, but I think it's also trying to do justice to the complexity of it at the same time.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (42:51): Yeah, I really appreciate that perspective. I did have a question that's kind of a little bit back to the level of the individual, but also somehow this interaction idea. So when you're originally talking about the different roles and identities that we all have, it made me think about different forms of psychotherapy. For example, internal family systems is one, that kind of views different aspects of your self as different parts that have different roles, and different needs, or views, or agendas. So I was just thinking about a bit of that multiplicity inside of one individual, and wondering if you've thought about participatory sensemaking or the dynamics of interaction in that way—within one person.

**Hanne De Jaegher** (43:39): Yes. That's an interesting question. Yeah. I can almost only think of that as we interact with other people. So all of our different elements, or identities, or bodies, the way we move around in the world does have that, what you just said. We are different beings within ourselves, but that within ourselves for me is always immediately coming out in the ways we interact in the world. That's where we are these different identities, or these different bodies.

(44:11) And in our book, *Linguistic Bodies*, we also talk about that. And maybe an easy way to explain that or to talk about bit more about it is that when you speak different languages, you relate differently and different ways of being of yourself can come out. So when I speak with my husband, he's Canadian, and we speak English together. But he also lived in the Netherlands, so he knows Dutch, which is like my mother tongue, but not quite the same, because my mother tongue is Flemish. But it means that I can sometimes speak in Flemish, and he will understand me. Not with all the nuances, but enough so that sometimes when I'm tired, I can speak in Flemish and he can hear me. And something else completely of myself comes out in that way—or can come out.

(44:58) And I think many of us have that experience. It doesn't even have to be a different language, like a separate language. It can also just be a way of speaking. It's well known that people have phrases and even invent words together with certain people, like with your sibling for instance, versus with a colleague. So different ways of being come out, but I always see it immediately in interactions with others.

(45:23) I mean, I do think we do that internally too. Of course we think, and we write, and we do all these individual things as well. But to me, I mean, it's almost like a picture, like the dynamic runs through my body differently when I speak this language versus that language, or when I'm interacting

with you versus when I'm interacting with a friend. So what is inside us, our different ways of being, are invited or come out, I think, in interactions.

[\(45:51\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

**Wendy Hasenkamp** [\(46:26\)](#): Something about all of this is making me think about synthesis. I think in some traditions or perspectives, there's an idea that the goal would be to integrate, for example in psychotherapy, all of those different aspects of yourself. The idea is that they should be integrated, or that would be a healthier state. And then I'm thinking about that level of integration between people. And then I go back to that tension that you spoke so beautifully about—about being yourself and letting another person be themselves. And where are the boundaries, and letting all that happen. And there's probably no clear answer, but I just appreciate all of the complexity that you're raising there.

**Hanne De Jaegher** [\(47:14\)](#): Yeah, I think it's an important question about synthesis, because I do think many of us share that idea that that's the ideal. Harmony and synthesis are the ideal. And in some sense, I agree that they are. But in another sense, it's unavoidable that that will be broken again. Ongoing becoming and ongoing sensemaking, especially also together with other people or in interaction with the world, unavoidably breaks up again. Breakdown, as Varela said, is part of sensemaking and is part of how we understand the world, and it actually leads us to different places of understanding.

[\(47:50\)](#) And actually I would say more, which is also something that Evan Thompson has said before. So it's a dialectic rather than synthesis seeking. And dialectic is always coming to some kind of understanding that seems joint, or connected, or integrated, or harmonious. And that leads immediately into new tension, and this ongoing dialectic movement never stops. So what Evan Thompson has said about that before and which is part of the enactive logic, is that when that stops—when we reach full synthesis or when we reach full harmony, and it doesn't break up anymore—is when the system dies. So one way in which that happens is that the system dies. The living system, the interaction, that could happen in synthesis when everything stops moving. It could also of course happen in full breakdown and full separation, that's also when the system dies. But actually, the point is that it keeps going as long as we live. And so synthesis is always something that we can expect to break again.

[\(48:46\)](#) And again, I think we know that in loving relationships. Like, a marriage can be wonderful, but it's always going to be also difficult, unavoidably. And I think it's a lifelong thing that we live with that. And we can learn to live better with it and move more smoothly, or be more accepting of the breakdowns, or be more creative, or be more trusting. But it's never going to end.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** [\(49:14\)](#): Yeah, that's making me think too, in biology, this idea of dynamic equilibrium. I think originally, there was this idea of homeostasis, which is kind of more like an equilibrium. But we realized more and more that actually, our biology is also designed to work with always these shifts, and that there's some state of general equilibrium, but it's moving and it's shifting. And I think that's reflecting too... I love the way you were just speaking about that in relationships also.

**Hanne De Jaegher** [\(49:45\)](#): Indeed, that characterizes biological living beings. So there's a tension in living self-organization between producing ourselves as material beings and distinguishing ourselves from the world. And that's also a topic in enactive thinking that's been written about by several people.

[\(50:04\)](#) So basic living already contains that tension for an individual, but it's always an individual in interaction. But we produce ourselves, and we grow, and our material being grows. But we cannot do

that in full openness to the world, because that would be dangerous and damaging. And the reaction to that is to close ourselves off, to build a boundary, but we also cannot fully do that because then we cannot take in the things that we need to grow, and to keep living.

(50:34) I think that's fascinating about the whole enactive logic and the enactive approach, that all these complexities and tensions run through each other and inform each other. And it's a thing that we conceptually have a framework for, that's also in continual development. And it's also something that we know so well in our living being. We live this. So yeah, that's to me, endlessly fascinating actually.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (51:00): Yeah. Me as well. I'm thinking too, you were speaking about boundaries, and how we need to in some ways isolate ourselves and our organisms from the world as a protective mechanism. But we need to have some openness to be able to get what we need and to exchange. And so much of your work, I feel like really points to the inherent interconnectedness of the world and all these different levels. So I'm thinking about beyond humans as well—you also mentioned earlier animals and plants, and their forms of sensemaking. So I'm just thinking really big picture, if you have any thoughts about how all of this integrates on a more planetary level, or nature level.

**Hanne De Jaegher** (51:51): Yes, there are people who are thinking about that and developing work about how this relates to our future, in relation to the planet that's being so loudly protesting what's going on, in a way. I guess we can sense what the planet is doing, what forests are doing. I think we can also understand interacting with bigger systems yet as a form of participatory sensemaking, and loving and knowing. I haven't done the theoretical work for that, but it's in development in different places. So I think that's going to be coming soon actually, that people will speak in those ways or think in those ways about those problems.

(52:30) And I think it's important, again I think also, to build trust that we can intervene. We cannot control it in this overdetermining kind of way, by having an idea and then putting it on the interaction. For instance, having a capitalist intervention is to me, an overdetermination that foregoes what's actually going on in the interactions between humans and the earth, or humans and nature. Capitalistic solutions have a different goal and a different theoretical framework that clashes perhaps in the wrong ways with the kinds of interactions that we need to better understand. So that would be an overdetermination in my view.

(53:13) But I think also, these kinds of theories, this kind of work can help us understand the complexities and where to intervene. But without having this idea that we will be able to control it from afar by setting ourselves apart from it... And also that we shouldn't underdetermine it. We are not in no relation with nature, and we cannot just let it go. Not for ourselves, because then hope is gone. But also not for... I mean, for continuing to live on the planet, having no relation with it anymore, this underdetermining is also not an option. And I am sure that there's a lot of work actually going on at the moment that is either using these ideas directly or very similar.

(53:58) And of course, I often feel that we are redoing what people in the '70s did, or around the '70s, using also these kinds of ideas of complexity. But I think we are also a little bit further now with enactive theory than we were then.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (54:16): Yes. It also makes me think of the role of listening, like you were saying, and how important that is in our relationship with nature.

**Hanne De Jaegher (54:25):** Yeah. Yes. And it also relates to... I mean, when I see the tree behind you, it's such a beautiful tree. There's some kind of experience of awe that we can have with nature, which is sort of our spiritual side, that also invites this kind of listening. And of course, people in Mind & Life community know that very well, but people outside of it maybe aren't so trusting of that. And that's a pity, because that's fully part of all this, I think.

**Wendy Hasenkamp (54:54):** Well Hanne, this has really been so enlightening and lovely. I want to thank you so much for this work. I think it really highlights the importance of philosophy, and the work of philosophy. And I appreciate the deep work that you do at that theoretical level, and also the ways that you're really working to apply that in the world in meaningful ways. So deep bows to you for all of your work, and it's really been lovely to chat. Thanks for taking the time today.

**Hanne De Jaegher (55:21):** Yeah, thank you for inviting me. It's nice to be invited to speak in this way about this work. Thank you.

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**Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp (55:31):** *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](http://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](mailto:podcast@mindandlife.org).*

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