The Virtues of Love, Love of Nature, and the Role of Participatory Sense-making

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> Abstract • We argue that by demonstrating the virtues of enactive listening in a loving epistemology, Candiotto makes an important contribution to the field of enactive ethics. Some critical considerations are put forward concerning the concept of participatory sense-making in the current literature and its applicability to a relationship with nature.

Handling Editor • Alexander Riegler

« 1 » In her target article, "Loving the Earth by Loving a Place," Laura Candiotto explores loving relationships between human and non-human beings. She applies an enactivist framework, in particular the concept of participatory sense-making, to define what she understands as love of nature. For enactivists, participatory sense-making is in the first place a concept that explains human intersubjective relations. It refers to social relations in which two or more people participate and in which the action of participation allows the different participants to make sense or to better understand (aspects of) the world around them (De Jaegher & Di Paolo 2007; De Jaegher, Di Paolo & Gallagher 2010; Di Paolo, Cuffari & De Jaegher 2018). More recently, Candiotto and Hanne De Jaegher (2021) have been expanding the concept of participatory sense-making to loving as participatory sense-making, which, according to the target article, defines a "mutual process of embodied sense-making as kindled by the desire to know more about the other, oneself, the relationship, and the world together" (§1).

« 2 » In "Loving the Earth by Loving a Place," Candiotto further extends the idea of loving as participatory sense-making to love of nature. Candiotto's goal is then to demonstrate that a desire to know more about the other and oneself does not only occur in relations between humans, but also in relations between humans and specific aspects of nature, for example, as in developing knowledge of and concern for the pollution of a river. Candiotto begins by challenging what she understands as the more traditional "universal account of the love of nature" (§11). By this she understands the Romanticist idea of a desire to become one with nature – to appreciate its beauty as a whole.

« 3 » Candiotto makes the good point that this idea is too abstract if we understand love of nature from a philosophical perspective in the moral sense of caring for nature. After all, the way in which we care for nature is by caring for specific aspects of nature, rather than by caring for nature as a whole. For example, we care for the Amazonian rainforest in that we are concerned about the destruction of its ecosystem or we are concerned about the melting of the glaciers in the Alps. The great advantage of an enactive account of love is that it is a *situated* account, that is, that it understands love as a relationship with another in their differences: the love for another is fueled by a desire to make sense of the particularities of this other and not by a desire to become one with the other.

« 4 » Candiotto draws on a connection she makes between panpsychism and enactivism to incorporate Freya Mathews's work on environmental ethics (§13). On the surface, this connection is flawed. Enactivists claim that cognition emerges from interaction, while panpsychists defend it as a basic feature of nature. Candiotto's argument only unfolds when we move beyond this conceptual contradiction and appreciate that Freya Mathews's panpsychist account shares enough enactive inclinations to draw inspiration from. Candiotto argues that –

> "enactivism and Mathews's panpsychism share two core tenets. These are interdependent autonomy (the self emerges out of and with the environment, Varela 1991) and ontopoetics (the communicative engagement between self and world, Mathews 2009)." (§13)

« 5 » Leaving aside the different theoretical frameworks in which enactivists and panpsychists work, a number of more significant issues arise from the claim that love of nature is adequately understood in terms of *participation*, and whether Candiotto is not rather arguing for a form of pseudo-participation. An interaction with the world that does not involve another present agent prima facie lacks the social nature prerequisite to participatory sense-making. The core issue is whether the hallmark of participation is the characteristics of the interaction or the intersubjective nature of an interaction. Intersubjective participation requires at least two present subjects that interact, thereby giving rise to a perspective on the world that is mutually accessible. This interactive reading of participatory sense-making is in line with De Jaegher and Ezequiel Di Paolo's original definition:

> "This is what we call participatory sense-making: the coordination of intentional activity in interaction, whereby individual sense-making processes are affected and new domains of social sense-making can be generated that were not available to each individual on her own." (De Jaegher & Di Paolo's 2007: 497)

« 6 » Candiotto provides the example of the river, in which –

> "[…] if you are emotionally receptive to the place, you can notice that the place is listening to you. If I treat a river with love, the river will listen to me by being healthy. If I treat it badly, it will listen to me by being sick and polluted, its inhabitants included." (§41)

This is an example of an interactive sense-making process, at least for the human involved. Sense-making is not merely subjective, but involves communication and interaction with our surroundings, including nature. Yet, the question remains: Is a loving interaction with nature adequately described as participatory or is this just a non-participatory sense-making process? Q1

« 7 » One may object that participatory sense-making is a cognitive process that is not necessarily equally balanced in the sense that participants would need to participate to the same degree. It is clear that forms of participation may vary: some of the par-

ticipants may be more actively involved in the interaction process while others may be more passive in the sense-making process. Furthermore, participatory sense-making, as it was originally developed, means "that we can feel varying degrees of connectedness with the other" (De Jaegher & Di Paolo 2007: 490). If we apply this to communication with nature, Candiotto has a point when she says that humans and aspects of nature may be different in the ways they communicate and feel one another's connectedness. Nonetheless, this does not resolve the problem that the "coordination of intentional activity" is fundamentally different between humans and (aspects of) nature. Granted that aspects of nature arguably have a certain kind of intentionality (e.g., a river seeks its way through the landscape), these aspects of nature do not have the kind of coordination of intentionality that we usually ascribe to human beings, allowing them to have a shared perspective on the interactive sense-making process needed for participatory sense-making. One challenge Candiotto's account of love of nature thus faces is to further develop an account of how participation with nature takes place or to distinguish between human and non-human types of participation/sense-making that possibly intertwine.

« 8 » Candiotto anticipates this worry, arguing that "[s]hared aliveness and, thus, participatory sense-making is the fundamental condition, not something that is achieved after the individual sense-making" (§40). However, this feeling of shared aliveness is a feeling of sharedness not a shared feeling, leaving Condiotto's defense against this particular criticism in need of clarification.

« 9 » Taking a broader perspective on the evolution of enactive theories also reveals a tendency in the past years to expand the concept of participation that is similar to how Candiotto uses it. From a limited foray into social cognition the concept has evolved to a crucial tool in the enactive framework (see, for example, Di Paolo, Cuffari & De Jaegher 2018). Yet, this tool is only useful if it is well defined. If participation is present in any kind of sense-making interaction, we hardly need a specific label for it. In this case it would have been just a useful tool for enactivists to understand sense-making better, and now we know that all sense-making is participatory, whether we are making sense of a chair or another person. In terms of historicity this is plausible: all sense-making processes are ultimately dependent on previous sense-making processes and some of them by developmental necessity were participatory. However, the label "participatory" can also be applied in a systematic immediate way in two senses:

- As a specific interaction irrespective of its historicity is participatory.
- A concrete interaction can give rise to a new domain of social sense-making that is available to each interactor on their own.

That a river has access to such a domain of sense-making remains questionable, and the notion of participatory sense-making in play here must consequently be weaker. Thus, the question arises: Is a concept of participatory sense-making that allows for the loving of nature as a participatory sense-making process still well defined enough to be useful in a broader enactive framework? Q2

« 10 » Let us return to the main topic of the target article: Love, or more specifically, love of nature. Candiotto's work is a critical expansion of enactive ethics in the direction of environmental ethics, building the expansion of engaged epistemologies as loving epistemologies that touch upon virtue epistemology and virtue ethics. Recently, a number of theories emerged that expand enactivism, as a theory of cognition, to diverse problems of applied ethics, such as problems related to political power and ideology (Maiese 2022; Dierckxsens & Bergmann 2022), health and illness (Svenaeus 2022), and environmental ethics (Werner & Kiełkowicz-Werner 2022). Candiotto offers a valuable contribution to this latter movement. She demonstrates that enactivism offers interesting concepts for understanding love of nature.

« 11 » Candiotto further develops her argument by introducing the concept of *enactive listening*, stating that –

> "the existential openness to letting the other be is indeed hearing, but also touching and smelling. This is the core of enactive embodied cognition that gets rid of the predominance of visual metaphors for knowledge and understands embodiment in a holistic manner." (§40)

Indeed, enactivism is useful for describing how we value and care for nature, because it understands our relation with the world as essentially embodied and situated within our surroundings, as a result of interaction and communication with these surroundings. A situated, i.e., non-representational, account of cognition has the advantage that it does not reduce nature to an object, but sees it as a complex network of different organisms interacting with one another. A further strength of the account is that enactive listening is a virtuous activity in itself. It may give rise to participation, yet the fundamental openness to connect with the alterity of the world is a virtue in itself (§35). Thus, a more conservative reading of the loving nature offers itself, that the virtues, i.e., enactive listening, cultivated in loving another person can be applied in non-participatory circumstances and still remain valuable, virtuous, and action-orienting. This entails the core claim that the openness we are called to extend to other people in loving relations is equally valuable in connecting to nature.

« 12 » However, as we have argued above, in order to further develop an enactive account of love of nature, some critical questions need to be answered. Generally speaking, Candiotto shows how enactivism allows us to conceive of a virtuous attitude toward nature, that is, an openness to aspects of nature that humans can cultivate by listening to particular aspects of nature (e.g., a melting glacier or polluted river). Nonetheless, it remains a challenge to spell out how one goes from enactive listening to love of nature (or vice versa). The idea of love as participatory sense-making leaves us with some explanatory gaps, as there appear to be significant differences between intersubjective participation and interaction between humans and nature. What is the difference between participation between humans and interaction with nature, and how does this difference relate to love of nature? Q3

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Loving a Place as Participatory Sense-Making?

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> Abstract • Candiotto appeals to the panpsychist notion of "becoming native" and the enactivist notion of "loving sense-making" to develop a situated approach to the love of nature. Although I am fully on board with Candiotto's claim that love of nature is of paramount importance and that community-based local interventions to preserve the Earth are urgently needed, I worry that an account that conceptualizes love of nature in terms of participatory sense-making is on shaky ground. The supposition that the Earth, localized in particular places, is a *partner* in a participatory process of creating meaning will strike many readers as implausible, and thus may prove to be inadequate in motivating interventions to preserve the Earth.

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« 1 » Laura Candiotto appeals to the panpsychist notion of "becoming native" and the enactivist notion of "loving sense-making" to develop a situated approach to the love of nature. Such an approach focuses on concrete places and the way in which we existentially engage with and within them. A "place" can be understood as a biological community of interacting organisms and habitats, comprised of minerals, plants, non-human animals, and humans. By loving a concrete, localized place, humans can develop a love of nature. Such love goes beyond a feeling of enjoyment and does not entail simply being one with nature. Instead, it centrally involves an appreciation of *difference* and a stance of valuing and caring. Building upon the account presented by Freya Matthews (2003, 2005), Candiotto describes a "native" as someone who grows and flourishes within a place and engages in a long-standing dialogical encounter with it.

« 2 » Central to Candiotto's account of the love of nature is the enactivist notion of participatory sense-making. On this account, love involves a desire to know more about oneself, the other, and the relationship. This account of love of nature thereby acknowledges the autonomy of each individual, including non-human animals, trees, and rivers. Importantly, such love acknowledges and preserves difference. It is love of an individual and involves acknowledgment of that individual's particular characteristics, peculiarities, and uniqueness (§8). Encountering the other-than-human allows humans to develop virtues such as affectionate attention, gratitude, openness, humility, and loyalty to the place (§30). What sustains these virtues is "enactive listening," which is a matter of "being emotionally receptive to particular expressive qualities of concrete lovers in an experience of shared aliveness" (§41). Such listening is central to the process of becoming a native.

« 3 » Note that by conceptualizing love of a place in terms of participatory sense-making, Candiotto affirms the existence of a reciprocal relationship in which the participants (some of which are non-human and non-animal) contribute to the production of shared meanings. The enactive framework that she appeals to emphasizes mutual communicative engagement and requires not only that a human listen to a place, but also that a place listen to a human. Tension and kinship are both part of a dialectic of loving encounters between two or more beings, wherein participants co-institute the meaning of their relationship and their identity.

« 4 » Is it possible for a non-human other to listen to me? Following Matthews, Candiotto notes that her claim is not that non-human beings possess a mind, but rather an *innerness*. Because the world is a living world, every being in its self-organization enacts its desire to live by generating meanings. Given that aliveness and sense-making are both key features of an ecosys-