# Foreword

If economics is famously concerned with scarcity, and politics with conflict, perhaps the sciences of the mind should be concerned with the management of non-sense. Isn't this the most general description for all the activity of the mind? To make sense of things. The world is constantly inviting us or demanding from us that we make sense of it. What do these solicitations have in common? Few of our contacts with the world manifest themselves as self-explanatory (perhaps a push, a kick, or a fall), which in a way must mean they originate at some point as a form of *non*-sense.

For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in the actual life of consciousness "one cannot say that *everything has sense* or that *everything is non-sense*, but merely that *there is sense*. ... A truth against the background of absurdity, and an absurdity that the teleology of consciousness presumes to be able to convert into a truth, this is the originary phenomenon."[1]

The chapters in this collection explore a variety of contexts in which non-sense can be examined. The first striking thing to notice is how wide this variety is: from non-sense in the biological realm, to non-sense in the form of sensorimotor breakdowns, in various aspects of pathological and non-pathological human experience, and in linguistic and cultural forms of misunderstanding, paradox, and "irrationality".

What, if anything, do the diverse meanings of non-sense explored in this volume have in common?

I would like to suggest that the notion of sense-making elaborated by the enactive approach to cognition[2] can be helpful in formulating questions about sense and non-sense in the various ways this issue is

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[1] Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945/2012). *Phenomenology of Perception* (D. Landes, Trans.). London: Routledge, pp. 309–310, emphasis in the original.

[2] Varela, F. J., Thompson, E., & Rosch, E. (1991). *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Varela, F. J. (1997). Patterns of life: intertwining identity and cognition. *Brain and Cognition*, 34(1), 72–87; Weber, A. & Varela, F. J. (2002). Life after Kant: natural purposes and the autopoietic foundations of biological individuality. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 1(2), 97–125; Di Paolo, E. A. (2005). Autopoiesis, adaptivity, teleology, agency. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 4, 97–125; Thompson, E. (2007). *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology and the Sciences of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

examined in this book. This enactive notion of sense-making is already guiding the work of several of the contributors.

To help us see the conceptual value of sense-making, let us first briefly introduce the contrasting background of more traditional perspectives to the study of the mind.

What is the conception of non-sense in traditional approaches? Regardless of important differences between variants, these perspectives can generally be said to be functionalist. Whether we speak of good old-fashioned artificial intelligence, or the extended mind, or predictive coding in the brain, to make sense in a functionalist approach is equated with the smooth running of computational processes that achieve sufficient coherence between sensory inputs and a representational economy sustaining the agent's worldview, goals, norms, and motivations for action. "Mental" states (e.g., desire–belief combinations) can fail to make sense because the sensory data do not fit or are incoherent with these states. The majority of work in functionalist cognitive science is about how a system can handle the necessary corrections to a representational architecture to deal with this lack of coherence. So, for traditional approaches, cognition is indeed about managing non-sense, but non-sense is here primarily an informational issue: lack of information or conflicting information with respect to the agent's world model.

Has this picture of non-sense as ambiguous or uncertain information changed with the advent of embodied and phenomenological critiques of functionalism, such as the enactive approach?

In enaction, sense-making is first of all an ongoing activity which is rooted in bodies as precarious self-sustaining identities constituted by material, organic, cognitive, and sociocultural processes. To make sense is for a body to encounter value and significance in the world, and these relate ultimately to the body's precarious, multi-layered identity. Sense-making is not something that happens *in* the body, or *in* the brain, but it always implies a relational and value-laden coherence between body and world – the world does not present itself as sense-data to be interpreted, but is itself a participant in the sense-making process and often the stage where my sense-making is enacted through my actions and those of others. Sense-making is not primarily a high-level voluntary interpretation of the world (though it can take this form) but bodily and worldly activities of all sorts, from biological and pre-reflective to conscious and linguistic. In all these cases, sense-making is always affective. It is the way in which a body makes a stand in a world with few guarantees, depending inevitably on this world for its own existence but

attempting to break free from its determinations – a relation that Hans Jonas insightfully characterized as one of needful freedom.[3]

Non-sense in this view is not merely the failure of sense, but its pervasive background. Like sense, non-sense is itself a result of sense-making. There is no non-sense without the activity that produces the co-defined relation between sense and non-sense. Like the poles of a magnet, the two concepts presuppose each other and relate in terms of tension. Unlike the magnetic poles, the relation between sense and non-sense is not symmetrical.

It might look as if the tension is uni-directional: non-sense can be frustrating and puzzling; it thereby elicits our attempts at sense-making. However, every time we make sense of anything, we are drawing the boundaries of non-sense by implication: not in a way that would allow us to say whether something will be nonsensical before it happens, but certainly at the moment when it happens. Non-sense motivates particular attempts at sense-making, but sense-making as a totality (for an agent or for a community) is what draws the boundaries of non-sense. I speak of boundaries and not of horizons because we do experience nonsense; we experience it actively as breakdowns and incoherence. The horizon of sense-making is the irrelevant, not the nonsensical. We don't care about the irrelevant, although it is possible to expand (personally and historically) into this horizon. Did we care centuries ago about gas molecules trapped deep in the Antarctic ice? Not much. But these days at least some people do, as they inform our views on climate change.

The boundaries of sense are graded and ambiguous, a point that some of the present chapters explore. Breakdowns come in degrees, and so intermediate positions between sense and non-sense can exist. And – especially relevant for human beings who approach the world with multiple sense-making perspectives often operative in the same body – non-sense is manifested as so many forms of dissonance, paradox, tension, and contradiction. These are not *states* of non-sense, but relations between time-extended *processes* and multiple sources of normativity. Non-sense (like sense) has a time-course. There is no instantaneous state of sense or non-sense because the relational dimension of sense-making is temporal. Contrast this with the atemporality of the notion of mis-information in functionalism. Sense is achieved coherence, but what goes on while this coherence is in the process of being achieved is strictly speaking *not-yet-*

[3] Jonas, H. (1966/2001). *The Phenomenon of Life*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

sense. Non-sense is consequently unfinished sense-making: a sustained activity that is impeded from reaching its culmination, at least for a sufficient duration and intensity to constitute an experiential object (a bodily tension, a paradox, a feeling of disorientation, of estrangement, of the uncanny). We hold non-sense in view. I want to highlight that the difference between not-yet-sense and non-sense is one of intensity and duration, which accounts for the affective release when a paradox, a tension, or a contradiction is resolved (the *aha!* moment).

I have insisted – and the point comes up again in many of the contributions in this book – that sense-making is an active process. This does not mean it is top-down or volitional in the sense normally given to the term. It can well be incorporated into the body's being-in-the-world and in the form of habits, both enabling and constraining. Just as much as an agent is constituted as such out of worldly processes, that is, it is *of* the world, so it is an autonomous organization that distinguishes itself from the rest of the world on which it depends, that is, it is *in* the world. The activity of an *agent* always belongs to sense-making. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the classic experiments in adaptation to distortions of the visual field[4] or in the progressive perceptual learning in situations of sensory substitution.[5] No learning, no adaptation without concrete attempts at making sense of the novel situation followed by breakdowns. In short, no recovery of sense-making is possible without a subject's active and committed involvement in the progressive turning of non-sense into sense, a process that may or may not happen with the aid of reflective awareness.

Keeping the active subject in mind sounds uncontroversial, and yet this is a hard-earned lesson that can have important consequences for the understanding and treatment of pathologies of meaning. In her recent article on embodiment and sense-making in autism, Hanne De Jaegher proposes that many of the sensorimotor and affective particularities in people with autism (restricted interests, obsession with order and detail, apparently dysfunctional repetitive movements, etc.) could be understood positively as manifestations of sense-making attempts. These "often interfere with everyday life, and this can make them difficult to deal with, both for the person with autism and for their social and familial environment. However, this does not imply that they could

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[4] Kohler, I. (1951/1964). The formation and transformation of the perceptual world. (H. Fiss, Trans.). *Psychological Issues*, 3(4, Monogr. No. 12), 1–173.

[5] Guarniero, G. (1977). Tactile vision: a personal view. *Visual Impairment and Blindness*, 71(3), 125–130.

not in themselves be relevant, salient, or significant for the person with autism. It might be that these behaviors are disruptive as a consequence of their manifesting in a context that can or will not accommodate them. This is not to suggest that such behaviors should simply be accepted. Rather it is to suggest that dealing with them should also start from the meaning they have for the person with autism, not just from the question of whether they are appropriate."[6]

The combined aspects of gradedness, time-course, and active commitment make the study of non-sense (and not-yet-sense) quite central for understanding human minds in particular. Animals meet their frustrations with different attitudes, but the sometimes pathological obsession with making some sense out of intractable non-sense is almost exclusively human. Put positively, unresolved non-sense is the engine for creative new forms of sense-making. Consider Zeno's paradox and the invention of calculus, the liar's paradox and the theory of types. Consider heavier-than-air flying machines. Remaining in non-sense, holding it in view, seems to be an extraordinarily obsessive form of human compulsion, indistinct from similar attitudes found in pathologies, except perhaps with hindsight, if and when some novel sense is eventually achieved.

In summary, exploring some of the facets of non-sense exposed by even a very quick enactive examination already suggests potentially important links between sense-making, experience, organic agency, and human subjectivity.

For this reason, I don't think we can study the mind in general without attending to the phenomena of non-sense, and this applies *a fortiori* to human minds. I consider that there is a lot to be gained from examining explicitly the relation between the diverse forms of sense and non-sense from perspectives where this relation is not reduced to problems of mis-information or mis-representation. The explorations in this book are timely and challenging, precisely because they don't attempt simplifications that may ultimately prove senseless.

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[6] De Jaegher, H. (2013). Embodiment and sense-making in autism. *Frontiers in Integrative Neuroscience*, 7(15). doi: 10.3389/fnint.2013.00015, 10.