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Ontology and Attention: Addressing the Challenge of the Amoralist through Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology and Care Ethics

Anya Daly 

Philosophy and Gender Studies, School of Humanities, University of Tasmania, Launceston, TAS 7250, Australia; anya.daly@utas.edu.au

Abstract: This paper addresses the persistent philosophical problem posed by the amoralist—one who eschews moral values—by drawing on complementary resources within phenomenology and care ethics. How is it that the amoralist can reject ethical injunctions that serve the general good and be unpersuaded by ethical intuitions that for most would require neither explanation nor justification? And more generally, what is the basis for ethical motivation? Why is it that we can care for others? What are the underpinning ontological structures that are able to support an ethics of care? To respond to these questions, I draw on the work of Merleau-Ponty, focusing specifically on his analyses of perceptual attention. What is the nature and quality of perceptual attention that underwrite our capacities or incapacities for care? I proceed in dialogue with a range of philosophers attuned to the compelling nature of care, some who have also drawn on Merleau-Ponty and others who have examined the roots of an ethics of care inspired or incited by other thinkers.

Keywords: ontology; attention; perception; ethics; ethics of care; phenomenology; Merleau-Ponty; ethical motivation; the amoralist



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1. Setting out the Problem

Bernard Williams, in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, sets out the philosophical parameters of the challenge of the amoralist—why should the amoralist follow the requirements of morality? Williams begins with a discussion of the exchange in Plato's *Gorgias* between Socrates—who poses the foundational ethical question of “what should I do?”—and Callicles, the amoralist—who counters that there is nothing anyone *should* do, morality is a mere convention and cannot be justified. Williams writes:

... even if there is something that the rest of us would count as a justification of morality or the ethical life, is it true that the amoralist, call him Callicles, ought to be convinced? Is it meant only that it would be a good thing if he were convinced? It would no doubt be a good thing for us, but that is hardly the point. Is it meant to be a good thing for him? Is he being imprudent, for instance, acting against his own best interests? Or is he irrational in a more abstract sense, contradicting himself or going against the rules of logic? And if he is, why must he worry about that? [1] (p. 26)

Williams points to two principal philosophical approaches that aim to address this challenge through establishing an Archimedean point; the first Archimedean point is to be found in Aristotle's elucidation of *Eudaimonia*, and the second in Kantian rational agency. Williams finds both of these approaches inadequate to the task of awakening the amoralist to the value of an ethical life. He suggests rather that what is needed is an extension of the imagination and an enhancement of the sympathies of the amoralist rather than an argument rationally demonstrating the folly of his ways. In concordance with the direction of Williams' thinking, I suggest that the seeming philosophical intractability of this challenge to the ethical life is overcome with the aid of Socrates himself; however, a Socrates in

alliance with phenomenology and the ethics of care. Socrates famously declared “No one knowingly does wrong” [2], and this has been given the epithet ‘Socratic Intellectualism’, that wrongdoing is an error of judgment, not having sufficient knowledge of the full consequences of one’s actions. While there is a case to be made for this interpretation, the failure in knowledge, I propose, is not so much in the details of decisions, motivations, actions, events, and consequences, as in the failure to recognize the ontological interdependence of individuals (or nations) existing in a world defined by radical contingency. The failure in knowledge of the amoralist (or the tyrant) is a failure of misrecognition, not an epistemological failure against the rules of logic, but a failure to recognize the relational ontological structures underpinning existence. The antidote to this misrecognition is not to be found in rational cognition and arguments, but rather in attentive percipience, a form of care.¹ This proposal is the underlying direction of the discussions and arguments I now present, engaging with a number of noteworthy thinkers along the way.

2. The Philosophical Roots of Care

The ethics of care initially emerged from the inadequacies of male-oriented approaches to moral theory to speak to women, to their personal and *particular concerns as women* with a different manner of being in the world. While the history of this style of thinking reaches back at least to sentimentalism, care ethics as a known philosophical school was launched with the work of Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings. Within current feminist scholarship, there is some controversy surrounding the work of Gilligan. Some have accused her of essentializing women’s experiences. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address this accusation fully here, however, suffice to say that I do not think this is the case. There are known facts, both biological and socio-political, that female bodies experience, undergo, and suffer situations that male bodies for the most part do not. Gilligan’s work, in my view, is not only attuned to the feminist project, but is arguably crucial to it to the same extent as the work of other ground-breaking women thinkers—Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Addams, Simone Weil, Simone de Beauvoir, Nel Noddings, Iris Marion Young, Helen Longino, Donna Haraway, Joan Tronto, to name but a few. Also, it would seem that this criticism springs from a concern to defend what is claimed to be a non-essentialist form of gender identity—that there can be entirely fluid identities, untied to the realities of the biological body—a kind of untethered consciousness that seems to be in danger of replicating all the problems of ‘the ghost in the machine’ as interrogated by Descartes.

What is without question is that Gilligan’s ground-breaking critique of Kohlberg’s ‘stages of moral development’, *In a Different Voice* [3], galvanized what is now recognized as one of the principal approaches to ethics across diverse domains. That *Care Ethics* has withstood the test of time is a testament to its pertinence, and it continues to evolve with the work of women and men philosophers who, as Annette Baier expressed it, “stand on the shoulders of us older ground-clearing women” [4] (p. xiii).

Baier explores the philosophical affinities of the ethics of care with the work of the Scottish Sentimentalist philosopher, David Hume, and she uses these commonalities to support and enrich the critiques of feminist care ethicists against the mainstream rationalist views.² [5]. Hume famously exposed the impotence of reason in confronting the amoralist standpoint, declaring: “it is not against reason that I prefer the destruction of half the world to the pricking of my little finger” [6]); the preference is entirely within the domain of sentiment, not reason. Due to Hume’s foregrounding of sentiment and the particular, Baier describes him as the “women’s moral theorist”, proposing that “Hume turns out to be uncannily womanly in his moral wisdom” [7] (p. 62). Hume champions sentiments over reason and rationality as the basis for ethics; he is concerned with the cultivation of the capacities for sympathy, or fellow-feeling, rather than the reduction of morality to the dogmatic adherence to rationally determined rules or principles. Nonetheless, the sympathy he promotes is one susceptible to the constraints of reason when conflicts inevitably arise in our diverse sympathies; sympathy and sentiments, while paramount for ethical insight and motivation, are not sufficient for a full ethical theory. Anticipating

phenomenologist Edith Stein's early 20th century work on the problems of empathy, Hume writes:

When I am at a loss to know the effects of one body [material entity] upon another in any situation, I need only put them in that situation and observe what results from it. But should I endeavour to clear up after the same manner any doubt in moral philosophy, by placing myself in the same case with that which I consider, 'tis evident this reflection and premeditation would so disturb the operation of my natural principles, as must render it impossible to form any just conclusion from the phaenomenon. [6] (p. xix)

Standing in the shoes of another, while potentially useful in awakening sympathies to appreciate the other's experience, is not entirely reliable; it is still the subject standing in the other's shoes and with this come all the expectations, life history, personality, and unconscious biases of that subject. The *exact* experience of the other remains inaccessible—we might only approximate it or may even potentially distort it. Nonetheless, what still stands is *our susceptibility to sympathetic interconnectedness* and this is pervasive in Hume's account of morality, revealing both "mutual vulnerability and mutual enrichment" [7] (p. 63). Hume's writings are, moreover, replete with very particular illustrations from life, not with abstract, absolutist pronouncements.³ Therefore, we can see there are commonalities that are key themes in both sentimentalism and the ethics of care—feeling, emotion, personal connections, situatedness, and vulnerability as against the rationalist ethics focused on autonomy, rules, and rights. Gilligan reflects on the difference between rationalist and sentimentalist approaches with the lived experience of women:

Since the reality of connection is experienced by women as given rather than as freely contracted, they arrive at an understanding of life that reflects the limits of autonomy and control. As a result, women's development delineates the path not only to a less violent life but also to a maturity realized through interdependence and taking care. [3] (p. 172)

Simply, Gilligan here is giving formal recognition to the fact that we are born into sociality, into connection.⁴ [8,9]. While for men the circumstances of birth are still determining, nonetheless, we cannot deny that the opportunities and freedoms afforded men have historically and culturally been more expanded than those of women. The circumstances of birth and of giving birth confront women directly with the realities of connection, interdependency, and contingency; men are able to avoid and ignore these realities, and so are more susceptible to building rationalist dreams which may be co-opted for violent ends.⁵ And this is why Gilligan can say that women's moral development is likely to lead to a less violent life. The idea of a maturity grounded in recognition of the interdependencies mentioned above is developed in specific directions by a number of later thinkers, such as Tove Pettersen, who highlights the importance of reciprocity within the caring relation; both carer and the one cared for must be attended to in the care [10]. We can say then, the care must be recipient-appropriate, and that self-sacrificing care is not a viable option. Recipient-appropriate care recognizes that to wilfully impose care on those who reject such gestures or on those whose long-term autonomy and freedom would be better served by withholding care, would run contrary to the very telos of care—the other's wellbeing. At the other pole of the relation, to sacrifice one's own wellbeing in favour of another's wellbeing may appear morally worthy, but, in reality, can be a distortion of care; the care offered serves the ego project of the carer by inflating their sense of moral superiority. It is only when the deep interdependencies are integrated into the sense of self, that the other's welfare is equal to one's own or an essential component of one's own self-understanding and values, such as is often the case with parents and their children, that the gestures of what appears as self-sacrifice are appropriate and morally praiseworthy. In all expressions of skilful care, the wider intersubjective, social domains are also implicated, and the relation itself remains paramount.

While contemporary care ethics derive from feminist theorizing, and phenomenological ethics from the aim to give philosophical significance to the interrelated concerns of the first-person perspective, the body, perception, and intersubjectivity, both can retrospectively find points of concordance with the sentimentalist philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment—not only Hume, but also his teacher Francis Hutcheson, Anthony Ashley-Cooper, Adam Smith, and some of the common-sense philosophers, notably, Thomas Reid and later Dougald Stewart.⁶ (see also [11–17]).

Care ethics and phenomenological ethics are bottom-up ethics as opposed to top-down ethics dependent on universal principles of utility, duty, or virtue; they begin with the particular, the first-person perspective, the body, situatedness, affectivity, and relationality or intersubjectivity.⁷ [18,19]. Care ethicist, Maurice Hamington, stresses that the ethical significance of the “body’s perceptive, expressive, epistemic and responsive capacities” dispose the individual towards a caring orientation, which is more primary than any moral–theoretical deliberations [20] (pp. 46, 50, 92); [21]. While both care ethics and phenomenological ethics have found generally positive receptions within the feminist community of scholars; nonetheless, some criticize the focus on embodiment as missing crucial ethical considerations; that it cannot adequately take account of systemic power differences; that the body can be the basis for discrimination and that the focus on the body overlooks socio-political dimensions. However, others (and I find agreement with them) argue that the particular percipient body is the essential starting point and is able to build towards the wider concerns of the socio-political.⁸ [11,17]. Increasingly, care ethicists are taking the themes of care into the wider socio-political sphere to address issues, such as justice, precarity, environmental issues, human rights, and democracy.⁹ (see also [11,22–31]).

3. Merleau-Ponty’s Analyses of Perception and Attention

The notion of attentiveness plays a key role in the ethics of care literature, with Noddings referring to “receptive attention as a fundamental characteristic of caring” [32] and Tronto proposing that “attentiveness is the first phase of care” [33] (p. 127). However, a phenomenological analysis of the role of perceptual attention in care and in morality is underexplored.

Perception inherently depends on the body and vice versa, and percipient bodies are situated in the phenomenal realm as well as the intersubjective realm. Merleau-Ponty emphasized there are no isolated sense-data. These are unfindable in experience; objects always exist within a field, whether a visual field, an auditory field, a tactile field, etc., [34] (p. 4). So too there are no disembodied, solitary, world-less, subjects; subjects as percipient bodies exist within both the phenomenal field and the intersubjective field, including the shared world.

Merleau-Ponty grounds morality unequivocally in perception. Perception opens up to the infinity of perceptual perspectives of all potential and historical others (and even future others), so that we inhabit a multiplicity of perspectives.¹⁰ [35]. Nonetheless, *the view from everyone* does not elide our differences; while I am always on this side of my body both physically and culturally, I am no longer the impenetrable interiority as advanced in Cartesianism; there are exchanges and intertwining between subjects and the world. This is how Merleau-Ponty is able to universalise his ethics and thereby avoid reduction to a relativist monocular perspective. Moral consideration is, thus, never a purely internal and private deliberation, but already implicates a multiplicity of perspectives. [11]

Importantly, Merleau-Ponty argues for a normativity within perception itself in contrast to traditional ethical theories, which conceive normativity as supervening on the event, action, and person according to the particular moral principle invoked—virtue, utility, or duty. Rather, every percept has the structure of a gestalt; it is wholistic and functions according to the structures of figure–ground, the ground prescribing how the phenomena

and other subjects are perceived. In the phenomenal realm, the ground/environment prescribes how the figure/object is perceived. For example, a misty atmosphere prescribes whether the landscape is perceived more or less determinatively. In the intersubjective realm, the context of others, the socio-political environment, and the culture prescribe more or less determinatively how the individual's self-perception, other-perception, and behaviour are perceived.¹¹ [36]. It is through the shifting attention between the figure and ground, between the object and environment, between the self and other, between the self and socio-political environment that the specific form and conditioning power of normativity can be recognized.

How can we better understand the role of attention in perception? Merleau-Ponty is able to offer crucial insights, and these insights give further support to the establishment of his non-dual, relational ontology.¹² (see [11,17,37–41]). He begins firstly with critical analyses of the two predominant accounts of attention in the history of philosophy, empiricism, and rationalism, exposing the limitations of these 'attention as searchlight' accounts before setting out his own.

The initial aims of Merleau-Ponty's analyses of attention are, thus, directed at refuting empiricism and intellectualism (rationalism) and their accounts of objectivity. Merleau-Ponty writes: "... empiricism deduces the concept of attention from the 'constancy hypothesis', that is, the priority of the objective world ... [and attention] is a spotlight illuminating pre-existing objects hidden in the shadows" [34] (p. 28). The attention described in this account is disinterested, neutral to its objects, and so it is difficult to account for consciousness, that there can be a connection between the object and the subject. And relatedly, how can a particular object be chosen among the multitudinous objects on offer? It would, as Merleau-Ponty describes, be necessary to show the power of "perception to awaken attention, and then how attention develops and enriches this perception" [34] (p. 29). On his account, empiricism, thus, has no resources to tackle these issues, because it relies solely on external connections. Merleau-Ponty then begins his consideration of the opposing account of intellectualism, drawing on Descartes' example of the piece of wax, which reveals that consciousness either grasps its object with clarity or with degrees of confusion. The form, for example, of either the candle shape of the wax, or of a geometric circle of a plate, exists only because consciousness already put it there. He sums up his rejection of both accounts thus:

What was lacking for empiricism was an internal connection between the object and the act it triggers. What intellectualism lacks is the contingency of the opportunities for thought. Consciousness is too poor in the first case and too rich in the second for any phenomenon to be able to *solicit* it. Empiricism does not see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not go looking for it; intellectualism does not see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or again we would not go looking for it. [34] (p. 30)

The upshot is that both empiricism and rationalism pre-suppose a pre-existing objective world for which attention provides neutral access, either directly through sensations or indirectly through representations. However, Merleau-Ponty proposes that *attention transforms the experience* and is a "new way for consciousness to be present toward its object ...", and it does this by creating a perceptual field according to the specificities of the exploratory perceptual organ [34] (p. 31). If the object includes features, such as colour, light, and form, then the field created depends on visual exploration; if it includes features of sound, tone, and rhythm, then the field created depends on auditory exploration. Until attention is directed towards the object within a sensory or thematic field, both the object and the field remain indeterminate. The subject is unable to identify, to understand, or to make sense of the perceived object until attention is solicited, and the field, even if not the focus of attention, is still an active presence within the perceptual encounter [34] (p. 33). The "perceptual syntax" includes attention, which brings the "constellation of givens" together, gives them sense, and, moreover, guarantees they can have sense [34] (p. 38).

Attention is, thus, neither neutral nor indifferent to its objects; attention transforms the experience of the object.

4. Presence with Objects and Presence with Other Subjects

In this section, I draw together a few ideas from diverse perspectives to make sense of the idea of attentive presence, and to demonstrate its importance in the ethical encounter. Within the literature on care ethics, there are various approaches to what is generally referred to as ‘attentiveness’ and the diversity of definitions, and the diversity of domains of applications of ‘attentiveness’ betray a certain level of conceptual imprecision. Sometimes, the term ‘attentiveness’ is used as an equivalent to ‘attention’. An article titled “Attentiveness in care: Towards a theoretical framework” [42] seeks to offer clarification on ‘attentiveness’, particularly in the health care setting, and it delineates a number of useful distinctions. However, from a phenomenological perspective, a few imprecisions persist. The authors state in the abstract that they will argue that “attentiveness is constitutive for good care, as it can create a space in which a relationship may arise” [42] (p. 686). While it is indisputable that attentiveness is essential for good care, that it allows the space for a quality of care that is deemed ‘good’, nonetheless, the relationship is primary, it pre-exists the attentiveness. The relation is non-negotiable; however, attentiveness is not guaranteed. There is a similar confusion in the analysis of Noddings [32] when she writes: “we listen or observe receptively and then we feel empathy; that is attention precedes empathy”. In my view, observing receptively is in fact a manifestation of empathy. Noddings refers to “a chain of events in caring”—a causal chain. This in my view, is not correct; the understanding of attention is imprecise due to the failure to take account of the ontological, and so I turn now to phenomenology and cognitive science, which offer insightful analyses addressing this issue.

Attention for Merleau-Ponty is transformative, in that it gives the subject “a new way of being present to objects”. However, in the intersubjective domain, I am proposing that attentive presence is triply transformative, giving *simultaneously a new way to be present to the subject’s sense of self, to the sense of other subjects, and to the other subject’s sense of self*. Attentiveness, or caring attention, therefore, transforms the self-experience of the carer, the experience of the other, and the self-experience of the recipient of the care simultaneously. Reciprocal attentiveness, thus, allows for mutuality in understanding each other’s affectivity, situatedness, and historicity. This supports a calibrated responsivity that is suitably attuned to the experiential specificities of the other, and guards against dominating stances which would overtly and covertly bend the interactions to the agenda of the carer. Presence is not the outcome of attention, nor attention the outcome of presence—they are co-arising, and attentive presence is transformative. Concisely, we can say that intersubjective attentive presence is a reversible relation, and this is why it serves to both underwrite and illuminate the authenticity of the ethical encounter.

Interestingly, Baart [43,44] picks up on the idea of presence as being significant for care. He presents the idea that presence is something that is cultivated through attuning to another’s “tempo, goals, work rhythm, language, work style, interest, perspective, etc . . . , the practitioner of presence offers, in addition to (professional) knowledge and experience, him- or herself” [42] (p. 687). And while this points to the potential of cultivation in presence, what it does not fully grasp is that antecedent to any of these cultivations, there is the need for the ‘practitioner’ to be present to themselves, present in their own skin, and present in their world. Without self-presence, any attempts to ‘attend to’ or to ‘be present for’ others remain artificial, fragile, and lacking authenticity. While this is hinted at, Baart and Klaver do not give a full analysis of the requirements of presence and the underlying supports for presence. And this is where a return to phenomenology would be useful.

The difference between *being present to objects* and *being present to other subjects* is also supported by recent studies in the psychology of perception. Shaun Gallagher, in his chapter ‘Inside the Gaze’ [45], draws out some interesting philosophical insights in considering the case of a young man whose perceptions were affected due to pressure

impacts of deep-sea diving followed by a long flight [46]. In brief, in his perception of objects, he enacted a two-step process—firstly, the visual identification of the object, and then secondly, he needed to become aware that it was in fact he who was visually identifying the object. The sense of the self-ownership of the experience was not automatic. However, this young man was on psychometric testing entirely ‘normal’, and his social interactions and recognition of others were not impacted at all. Gallagher, while acknowledging further empirical research is needed, suggests that whereas the perceiving subject seems to have an inalienable sense of ‘mineness’ in the experience of another perceiving subject, with objects, this may dissolve [45] (p. 100). While objects are capable of defining a different vantage, it is only with other perceiving subjects gazing back that a subject has the irrefutable sense of ‘me’, that ‘I am present’, that ‘I exist’, and that ‘this experience is mine’. ¹³ [47–49]. And Merleau-Ponty remarkably anticipated the significance of these recent scientific findings through his philosophical analyses:

Just as perception of a thing opens me up to being, by realizing the paradoxical synthesis of an infinity of perceptual aspects, in the same way, the perception of the other founds morality by realizing the paradox of an alter ego of a common situation, by placing my perspectives and my incommunicable solitude in the visual field of another and all the others. [35] (pp. 26, 70). ¹⁴ [50]

Perception is thus fundamental to the establishment of a phenomenological ethics because perception itself has a normative dynamic due to the figure–ground structure inherent to any percept. Things are always situated in a field; so too subjects always belong to a broader sphere of sociality, ‘whether at the level of family, community, nation, species, or animality’. Because of the shifting attention from self to other and back again, perception is fundamentally relational. ‘This inherent relationality of perception is what underwrites the meaningfulness of physical events and social encounters’ [36] (p. 147). Therefore, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates in two senses that even in mere object perception, others are implicit; firstly, while perception of an object includes various potential vantages for myself, these potential vantages are also available to other possible subjects; and secondly, because we are born into a world that is already inhabited, the meaning and use-value of objects is conveyed to us by others. The perceptible world already implicates others because we are *of* the world; the social and the perceptible worlds are interpenetrated through and through. ‘Moral consideration is thus never a purely internal and private deliberation but already implicates a multiplicity of perspectives, ‘all the others’; historical, present, and even future perspectives’ [36] (p. 149).

While in the absence of empirical studies, the following thoughts remain purely philosophical even speculative, nonetheless, we can evaluate them on their coherence and explanatory value. So, we might ask, is this issue of attentive presence where the amoralist fails? He is unable to summon sufficient or *any* attentive presence. Perhaps he is absorbed or distracted elsewhere; perhaps his sense of embodiment is impaired, his sense of self is ‘in his head’ not grounded in body, place, and relation. Simply then, he is absent for himself, absent for others, and, arguably, absent for life. Merleau-Ponty describes the gaze of the amoralist as an inhuman gaze, through which he regards others as mere insects by withdrawing into the core of his thinking nature [34] (p. 378). And crucially, if the amoralist is incapable of an attentive reciprocal gaze, incapable of attentive presence with others, then we might well ask whether he has a sense of self-ownership within the experience of the encounter. Are encounters with other fellow creatures merely experientially equivalent to an encounter with an object that can potentially be dissolved? That the amoralist does not receive the affective payoffs of self-affirmation and self-transformation in his interpersonal interactions may be why he can remain impervious to the morality or immorality of his actions. Relations with others are perhaps, in a sense, experimental, and he is like an observer in his own life. Will there be a pay-off? Will my sense of self be affirmed? No? Well, let us try this then. ¹⁵

Back to Bernard Williams— have his concerns as set out in the beginning of this paper been addressed? Williams considers whether Callicles, the amoralist, ought to be convinced that an ethical life is justified. “Is he being imprudent, for instance, acting against his own best interests? Or is he irrational in a more abstract sense, contradicting himself or going against the rules of logic? And if he is, why must he worry about that?” [1] (p. 26).

The first question requires us to answer with further questions—what in fact are Callicles’ best interests? Who decides? If he prefers ‘the destruction of half the world to the pricking of his little finger’, then one could assume that putting existential survival under threat would be ‘imprudent’, but it may still not dissuade Callicles. Imprudence, why care? Why should he care? Why should anyone care about caring? And with that too, we could say he would not be persuaded by rational means. Ought Callicles, the amoralist, be convinced that an ethical life is justified? ‘Ought’ most certainly implies ‘can’; perhaps Callicles is simply a defective, deficient, and possibly irredeemable human being. I have argued that the defects and deficiencies concern the capacities for attentive presence, for care, afforded to each subject in virtue of being embodied, percipient, and intersubjectively constituted beings. Until there is ‘something in it for him’ at a deeper level than mere rational and prudential considerations, there is no reason why Callicles ought to be convinced of the value of an ethical life. Until his likely fragile, small sense of self gains, a measure of robustness through attentive presence to his own embodied experience, supported by the gazes and gestures of care of others, living in his skin will remain an empty experience—the life of an amoralist (as too the tyrant) is devoid of authentic vital connection, and because of this, it is devoid of joy. Being attentively present to such a one demands the scope of care of a Bodhisattva.

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Notes

- ¹ In looking into the etymology of the term ‘attention’, I was struck by how many historical sources and definitions there were. Attention is variously described as: the active direction of the mind upon some object or topic; the power of mental concentration; the steady application of the mind; a giving heed; a stretching toward; consideration; observant care; the act of tending; being present at; care. We can see here that it is both a capacity and an act, it might be purely cognitive or affective, or both. Sometimes, the term ‘attentiveness’ is used in the care ethics literature, which, while highlighting a particular affective quality, does not capture all the senses of ‘attention’, which I aim to pursue in this paper.
- ² See also Michael Slote’s *The Ethics of Care and Empathy* [5], in which he traces key commitments in care ethics back to the sentimentalists.
- ³ Astonishingly, for an 18th century male thinker, from either his sympathetic imagination or from real-life experience, Hume sympathetically presents the case of a young Parisian woman of means who selects a sexual partner to father her child, and thereafter pays him an annuity to stay out of their lives, so she would not need to live under the tyranny of a husband.
- ⁴ This idea of an inherent sociality is one explored at length over the history of phenomenology. See Magri and Moran [8] and Jardine [9] for some recent contributions to this scholarship.
- ⁵ And the dreams of reason bring forth monsters as Francisco Goya depicted. Available online: <https://www.19thcenturyart-facos.com/artwork/dreamsleep-reason-produces-monsters> (accessed on 3 March 2022).
- ⁶ Additionally, both ethical traditions find significant points of agreement with American pragmatism (notably, Jane Addams [12] for Care Ethics, and William James, Charles Sander Pierce, and others for phenomenology). Both are also to a certain extent attuned to Asian philosophy; Confucianism for Care Ethics (see Li [13,14]), Buddhism and Taoism for phenomenology (see Loughnane [15] and May [16]). Feminist Care Ethics can also be regarded as a moral descendent of phenomenological ethics, in that feminist theorists have drawn on key ideas in phenomenology to build their own accounts. For a sustained discussion of these intellectual debts, see [11,17].
- ⁷ While these commonalities are significant, there are differences within each tradition (see Held [18] (pp. 9–15) and Engster and Hamington [19]) and between the traditions. Many key thinkers in the tradition of Care Ethics defend particularism and reject the attempts to reconcile ‘care’ with ‘justice’, which they propose requires a universalism. Nonetheless, there are equally defenders of the opposite view. As Engster and Hamington stress, “what binds care theories together, as with other schools of thought, is not a doctrinaire commitment to a singular understanding of the theory, but a general endorsement of a number of different theories”; they note in this regard the relational basis of morality, responsivity, context, and situatedness. They also cite Joan Tronto, who

declared that Care Ethics was committed to crossing boundaries; boundaries such as morality and politics, disinterested ethical theory versus approaches that demand attention to the particular and the boundaries between the private and the public.

The phenomenological position espoused in key statements from Merleau-Ponty allows for a multiperspectivalism that underwrites the universalising of an ethics based on the percipient body—and these are his non-absolutist universal ethics. See Daly [11,17].

See Young [22,23]; Tronto [24]; Hamington [25]; Robinson [26]; Engster [27]; Laugier [28]; Daly [11]; Fitzgerald [29,30]; Hamington and Flower [31].

Daly is citing the work of Merleau-Ponty [35] (pp. 26, 70) here.

See Daly [36] for an extended discussion of Merleau-Ponty's analyses of the normativity of perceptual gestalts and the implications for intersubjectivity, ethics, and ethical failure. Normativity has throughout history derived from religious traditions or universal principles (e.g., human flourishing, duty, human rights, etc.)—Merleau-Ponty's ground-breaking account of normativity brings it down to earth, to the situated, percipient, and embodied subject.

Many feminist philosophers have invoked relational ontologies to address their philosophical and ethical concerns (see Robinson [37] (p. 29); Butler [38]; Witt [39]; Brubaker [40]; Jenkins [41]). However, few have acknowledged how it is that Merleau-Ponty's ground-breaking work on the body, perception, and intersubjectivity that grounds such ontologies. Merleau-Ponty's work on the reversibility thesis and the later notion of 'flesh' articulates his relational ontology across these domains. See Daly [11,17].

Gallagher explores this case in more depth in his 2015 paper 'Seeing without an I: Another look at immunity to error through misidentification' [47]. Therefore, the impact of solitary confinement is known to have devastating impacts on the sense of self—see Gallagher [48] and Guenther [49].

For extended discussions of the significance of this short but powerful statement, see Daly [50] (pp. 17–19).

Moriarty in the latest film version of *Sherlock Holmes* fits this characterisation perfectly.

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