

The Philosophical & Spiritual Body: Phenomenology & Theology

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Hamington (2004, p. 2) states that those who study care ethics find it difficult to define care. But perhaps this will provide at least a starting point. Care: action which is predicated upon concern which may override a sense of personal comfort or safety. Perhaps this might also go hand in hand with love. It is selfless and yet feels pain along with the one or many cared for.

Because I feel I know the feelings of others; and therefore I care. The fullness of my being compels me to care for even the starving child in sub-Saharan Africa because I can easily imagine the pangs of hunger and parched lips of dehydration. The love of wisdom and the extension of my existence across the many miles of the earth or perhaps the expanse of interstellar space facilitate a concern and a burden in my being.

Hamington (2004, p. 53) uses a simple term “the flesh” to refer to what is called “the ontological hinge. This is the point where the external passes over to the internal and the internal passes over to the external. Hamington also suggests that this flesh is the link between what it is to be the other and what it is to be one’s self. To put it another way, it is a portal of communication. But communication is much more than the transmission of data or ones and zeroes like a computer network. To the best of our empirical knowledge this flesh is all we have to express ourselves on into eternity. This communication exceeds the simplicity of words and thoughts to the level of life itself. Perhaps this is the process which is employed when a person or a people pray resulting in healing or even the restoration of life.

Abram (Hamington, 2004, p. 53) states that “humans are tuned for relationships. The eyes, the skin, the tongue, ears, and nostrils-all are gates where our body receives the nourishment of otherness”. Again, a portal of communication; we receive and

express much more than words but ideas filled with wisdom but sometimes foolishness. And on a completely different level we communicate feelings. Not emotions but knowledge of comfort and ecstasy or pain and agony.

Before his untimely death Merleau-Ponty began to develop his theory of intersubjectivity. Though this was considered a radical notion the concept of embodied care was thought to be consistent with his well-defined principle of human interconnectedness. Merleau-Ponty: others are not fictions with which I might people my desert-offspring of my spirit and forever unactualized possibilities-but my twins or flesh of my flesh. This intersubjectivity speaks of the reciprocal nature of our sense. Merleau-Ponty refers to the propagation of bodily experiences; this is the receiving and transmitting of each separate reality to the other.

Hamington (2004, p. 55) makes the simple statement "I know about being cut and bleeding" and it stands to reason that he therefore would know the experience of another who is cut and bleeding. This was exhibited all too well when I was suffering from a ruptured disk. Elsie (my wife) and I were working on a home improvement project when I accidentally cut myself. I was heavily medicated due to the back injury, such that I felt nothing. But Elsie felt it; she was in tears and emotionally distraught as if she were the one bleeding.

As I pass through each day I focus on being aware of other around me. Attempting to reach out with a smile and kind word to assure them of their worth and valued existence. Also, I know that everybody is experiencing something that is negative on its face. This sometimes appears in the countenance (affect) and the way

they walk or stand. I see this and I feel their pain and want to reach out with a positive affect in an attempt to lift them up and help bear the burden on their soul.

Just as Hamington (2004, p. 55) speaks of handling a screwdriver with no particular thought but as a force of habit, I experience this with playing a musical instrument. Of course, the more often I practice the greater facility I have and am able to play “mindlessly”. It is not that I know that the fingers of my left hand are placed thus: index=A string, 2nd fret; middle=low E string, 3rd fret; ring finger=B string, 3rd fret and pinky=high E, 3rd fret. I can see this pattern in my head and pick it out on a piano keyboard. But habitually my hand knows this is a G major triad and it knows what it feels like. The reference to riding a bike (2004, p. 59) is true but I figured out that in the too many intervening years since I rode a bike to school I had lost my touch and could no longer ride with no hands. This was a very dangerous experiment.

Care is not just for acute conditions but can be preventive, instructive or a method for encouragement.

Hamington’s comment regarding the holocaust (2004, p. 61) struck a chord with me; I thought that most anybody would know exactly what is being discussed if the term holocaust is stated. Who wouldn’t know what this is a reference to?

The competence of caring seems to have dissipated with an erosion of empathy. I believe the Old English rendering of a verse from a Pauline Epistle describes exactly this thing that Hamington speaks of: “...Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering...”(Colossians 3:12, AV). Bowels of mercy; empathy that grows out of our inner being of knowing every facet of the life world. Hamington (2004, p. 62) tells of the

feelings of Arendt at the trial of Adolph Eichman. I experienced this same thing, when after Saddam Hussein had been captured, tried and found guilty of capital crimes in Iraq, as I watched the video of him ascending the scaffold, my heart was broken; I could not relish the spectacle of his hanging much less hate him.

Arendt speaks of “the banality of evil” this is when we dehumanize the enemy so as to exterminate them. After all, they are not people they are... whatever the favorite ethnic slur.

Hamington proposes (2004, p. 64) that the caring imagination allows us to bridge the gaps between ourselves and unknown other and helps place our caring in psychosocial context. Perhaps when this moral imagination goes awry we have perverse fantasies. Thus caring imaginations become uncaring. The modern media provides entertainment which requires little if any imagination. Without this exercise, perhaps our world is losing the ability to engage in imagination at all. And therefore we have no caring imagination. Thus a warning from two thousand years ago seems to have come true; “the love of many shall grow cold” (Matthew 24:12, AV).

My exercise of caring imaginations function of critical thinking and critical application arose in triumph while I was considering the battle in the US congress regarding the Affordable Care Act. I came to the conclusion that the only humane thing to do was to take care of those who need caring for. Two thousand pages of requirements which nobody read before it was voted on or a broken website are not the real issue. The question is whether we care about each other.

References:

Hamington, Maurice. 2004. *Embodied Care: Jane Addams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Ethics*. Urbana, Illinois. University of Illinois Press