

# The world worth making: Implementing care aesthetics to boost well-being

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## Abstract

In treating care as a moral imperative, the ethics of care aims for normativity, yet its normativity is thrown into jeopardy by the fact that standards of care vary dramatically among care-givers. To counter the limitations of care ethics, I propose care aesthetics, whose success reflects *measurable* metrics. Rooted in ameliorative practices, care aesthetics stresses the *well-being* of the cared-for, whereby flourishing entails both capacity and access. Thus, care aesthetics and care ethics are distinct, since the former treats the well-being of the cared-for as proof of the “sign that our caring has been received”. To demonstrate the measurable features of well-being, I offer two concrete examples: one proposed by landscape architect Joan Iversson Nassauer and another focused on curatorial practice (*curare* is Latin for care). To explain why philosophers have overlooked the role of well-being in signalling the success of care, I describe how concepts such as balance, harmony, order and unity, which were originally characterised as material, became *immaterial* aesthetic concepts by the 20th Century. I then circle back to connect well-being to epistemology and ethics, before discussing how the goal to enhance the well-being of cared-fors and care-givers alike stands to enrich quotidian experiences.

**Keywords:** aesthetic concepts; balance; ethics; epistemology; harmony; sustainability; order; unity; values; well-being

**Resum.** *El món que val la pena fer: implementar l'estètica assistencial per augmentar el benestar*

En tractar les cures com un imperatiu moral, l'ètica de la cura té com a objectiu la normativitat, però la seva normativitat es veu amenaçada pel fet que els estàndards d'atenció varien dràsticament entre els cuidadors. Per contrarestar les limitacions de l'ètica assistencial, proposo una estètica de cures, l'èxit de la qual reflecteix mètriques mesurables. Arrelada en les pràctiques milloratives, l'estètica de les cures posa l'accent en el benestar de les persones ateses, per la qual cosa florir comporta tant capacitat com accés. Així, l'estètica de la cura i l'ètica de la cura són diferents, ja que la primera tracta el benestar de les persones ateses com a prova del «signe que la nostra cura ha estat rebuda». Per demostrar els trets mesurables del benestar, n'ofereixo dos exemples concrets: un de proposat per l'arquitecte paisatgista Joan Iversson Nassauer, i un altre centrat en la pràctica curatòria (*curare* en llatí vol dir tenir cura). Per explicar per què els filòsofs han passat per alt el paper del benestar a l'hora d'assenyalar l'èxit de les cures, descripció com conceptes com ara l'equilibri, l'harmonia, l'ordre i la unitat, que originalment es carac-

teritzaven com a materials, es van convertir en conceptes estètics immaterials al segle xx. A continuació, connecto el benestar amb l'epistemologia i l'ètica abans de discutir que l'objectiu de millorar el benestar dels cuidadors i les cuidadores és enriquir les experiències quotidianes.

**Paraules clau:** conceptes estètics; equilibri; ètica; epistemologia; harmonia; sostenibilitat; ordre; unitat; valors; benestar

### Summary

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## 1. The world worth making secures well-being for human and non-human beings alike

In the 1990s, several feminist philosophers championed the ethics of care, or care ethics, as a way to value the particularity of human relationships and daily activities. Care ethics sought to insert meaning into the everyday, while offering an alternative to rather abstract notions such as justice and rights. In this paper, I propose the aesthetics of care, or care aesthetics, as an alternative to care ethics. In the first place, I worry that care ethics is framed as top-down. That is to say, less vulnerable people tend to care for those who are more vulnerable, whether children, the elderly or the sick. This begs the question, who cares for caregivers? As Nel Noddings, an early care ethics proponent, notes:

We do not expect cared-fors to do for us what we do for them, nor do we expect payment of some sort. Instead, we look for signs that our caring has been received. What we do by way of caring satisfies a need in the cared-for, completes the caring relationship and enriches our lives as carers. (Noddings, 2013: xviii)

Care ethics stresses the carer's goodness in making sacrifices in order to do the right thing, although "what is right" is comparatively subjective since right action largely depends on whose interests are at stake. In contrast to care ethics, which looks for "signs" that the cared-for's needs are satisfied, care aesthetics considers the cared-for's *measurable* well-being proof of the care-giver's success.

Care aesthetics' focus on the cared-for's well-being, whether human well-being, ecosystem functioning or an object's vitality, distinguishes care aesthetics from care ethics. In contrast to care ethics, care aesthetics accommodates a child attending to a parent or a horse saving its rider's life.<sup>1</sup> Rooted in ameliorative practices, care aesthetics effectively boosts the well-being of carers and cared-fors alike.

Additionally, I worry that care ethics' focus on cared-fors' needs paves the way for corporations to justify rainforest destruction in ethical terms. For example, corporations who deem their cared-fors inhabitants eager to work can ethically justify palm-oil plantations by pointing to the local jobs they've created in order to process, manufacture and sell the 70% of personal care products that contain palm oil (such as soap, shampoos, lotions and make-up) to consumers, whom they also deem cared-fors. By contrast, suppliers and purchasers practicing care aesthetics must reflect on the measurable impact of their actions. With care aesthetics, the cared-fors include all of the forests' inhabitants (including flora and fauna), as well as the unemployed and potential consumers. Rather than boosting unemployment, care aesthetics grounds business decisions in ecosystem functioning, in order to maximise the flourishing of all cared-fors. Care aesthetics is thus better suited for evaluating both the cared-for's care and the carer's sacrifices in combatting ill-being. Razing rainforests destroys ecosystem functioning, which actually reduces human well-being and is thus rather uncaring and unethical.

Prior to the widespread availability of the Covid-19 vaccine, nurses and doctors repeatedly remarked how the intimacy and individuality ordinarily associated with hospital care had given way to rather "uncaring" approaches. Since friends and family couldn't visit in person, patients communicated via tablets and tended to die alone. I thus suspect that today's medical professionals might consider Noddings' assumptions regarding both natural and ethical caring no less abstract than either "justice" or "rights", which "care ethics" sought to replace.

The existence of legally-protected rights minimally ensures the equitable distribution of justice. Rights, at least, can be defined and ratified. However, the question always remains: defined by whom and for whom? None of us gets to choose our "rights". They are either "inalienable" (endowed by our Creator), man-made (e.g. defined by UN treaty signatories) or particular (specified by local/national laws). In fact, access to water wasn't a "stand-alone right" until 2010, some 62 years after the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These days, water is only a right for human beings, not for other living beings (beyond those involved in agriculture) whose well-being depends on water. Rights are meant to be distributed equally, yet standards of

1. I have in mind here a real-life situation in which the life of a rider thrown from a spooked horse was actually saved by the horse, which immediately returned to the stable without its rider, thus indicating that she was in danger. The internet is full of stories in which horses save riders and vice versa.

care are comparatively inequitable. Even a highly-respected care-giver could seem disrespectful, neglectful and/or controlling of others. Indicative of the priority of physical well-being over ethical action, the baby sitter who unexpectedly falls asleep in front of the television leaves the kids at risk of getting into trouble. Ordinarily, such neglect goes unremarked, but if a kid suffers, the baby sitter won't be invited back.

In this paper, I first describe the limitations of care ethics and explain why "caring-for" is an aesthetical practice rather than an ethical one. To demonstrate the measurable features of well-being, I analyse two concrete examples: one developed by landscape architect Joan Iversson Nassauer and another focused on curatorial practice (*curare* is Latin for care).<sup>2</sup> Since well-being indicates care aesthetics' success, I next review how philosophy's classical focus on material properties gave way to immaterial *aesthetic concepts*, which may explain the tendency of aestheticians to neglect well-being, whose very materiality renders it "non-aesthetic". I then circle back to connect well-being to epistemology and ethics.

Well-being may very well be *every* everyday aesthetician's goal, but as far as I can tell only Kevin Melchionne insists on its significance. The heading for this section, "The world worth making secures well-being for human and nonhuman beings alike", builds on Melchionne's terse abstract: "the point of everyday aesthetic activity is well-being" (Melchionne, 2014). While both of our approaches address well-being, everyday aesthetics focuses on the experienter's well-being, whereas care aesthetics also aims to ameliorate the other's well-being. Finally, I discuss how care aesthetics' goal to enhance the well-being of cared-fors and care-givers alike stands to enrich quotidian experiences.

## 2. The limitations of care ethics

In 1958, psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's six-stage model for moral development led him to conclude that women have poor aptitudes for moral development, stunted as they are at Stage 3 or 4 (the golden rule and rule-following, respectively). Twenty-five years later, Carol Gilligan proposed an alternative view. Rather than explaining or defending women's low standing in Kohlberg's model, she argued that his model is limited since it treats morality as an *abstract* concept and fails to account for a relational view of morality, which she attributed to women (Gilligan, 1982). Eventually, her critique evolved into the ethics of care, as developed by philosophers Nel Noddings (1982), Sara Ruddick (1989), Alison Jaggar (1991), Virginia Held (1993; 2006) and Fiona Robinson (1999), among others. For good, the ethics of care emphasises: "interdependence, community, connecting, sharing, emotion, body, trust, absence of hierarchy, nature, immanence, process, joy, peace and life" (Jaggar, 1992: 363-364).

2. I first explored these cases in my presentation 'Aesthetics of Care' during the 2015 ASA National Meeting.

Well-being is noticeably missing from this list, though feelings of joy and peace tend to approach well-being. Positive self-assessments of well-being tend to signal some combination of access and capacity, similar in effect to Hannah Arendt's notion of freedom, where the "I will" and "I can" coincide (Spaid, 2019: 8). Well-being and happiness are not necessarily synonymous; in surveys, some people rate high for happiness yet score low for well-being and vice-versa.<sup>3</sup> Wealth tends not to play a role either, since people from poorer nations sometimes rank higher for well-being than those from wealthier nations,<sup>4</sup> while those inordinately focused on their own precarity tend to remain oblivious to their well-being. Since "disabled people rank their own quality of life as at least as good as anyone else's" (Scully, 2020: 58), abilities seem not to play a significant role either. For this reason, I prefer the term capacity to capability. The former implies one's potential to learn and adopt skill sets as needed, whereas the latter delimits the here and now, which tends to be very limiting.

In caring for others, the ethics of care pairs the "cared for" with a "carer". Persons in precarious positions cannot and are thus not expected to care for others since they themselves require care. To my lights, what is particularly problematic about this model is the way care extends from the more capable (whether wealthy, educated, autonomous or self-sufficient) to the less capable. On this level, care ethics risks becoming a form of maternalism (a feminised version of paternalism), such that the stronger assume responsibilities for the weaker. I thus worry about parents, doctors, leaders and CEOs, all of whom have ethical responsibilities to ensure the well-being of those in their domain. Who is responsible for caring for those on top? Being lopsided (top-down), care ethics neglects durability and sustainability. It's no wonder so many care-givers turn to self-care or eventually require care themselves.

Structuring ethics in terms of care proves deeply problematic for several reasons. As briefly noted, it seems short-sighted to saddle the least vulnerable with ethical mandates. Normative ethics is meant to be binding, but care-giving practices vary widely in practice. Measurable metrics are needed to discern successful care practices. Were this otherwise, people would never point to guardians as the source of childhood trauma. Consider the unintended consequences of Catholics whose expectations of religious training harmed their children.

While I agree that being in caring relationships stands to enrich cared-fors and care-givers alike, care ethics is hardly universal, since it concerns those in "caring relationships" and is grounded in some expectation that cared-fors' "signs" make carers' sacrifices worthwhile, which doesn't always ring true. These days, 28% of American heads of households live alone,<sup>5</sup> 36% of Amer-

3. For more on relevant indices, see: <<https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/industry-research/happiness-well-being-index/>>.
4. Jon Clifton, <<https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/235973/freedom-rings-places-not-expect.aspx>>.
5. <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/more-americans-are-living-solo-and-companies-want-their-business-11559497606>>.

icans feel lonely (including 61% of young adults and 51% of mothers with young children)<sup>6</sup> and 20% of American millennials claim not to have any good friends.<sup>7</sup> Since not everyone is or can be engaged in caring relationships, care ethics is not relevant for everyone; whereas care aesthetics, which applies to human and non-human beings alike, is universal in scope.

To dissuade care-givers from inflicting their expectations onto their cared-fors, Yuriko Saito remarks:

In caring, I respect the other's existence and integrity for who she is, instead of imposing my idea of who she should be or who I want her to be. [...] As such, it is crucial that the other is experienced in its concrete singularity and specificity rather than [as] an abstract entity. (Saito, 2020: 188)

While I agree that the other's existence and integrity are important, potential imbalances in capabilities between care-givers and cared-fors put the latter's autonomy at risk unless well-being is the goal, since autonomy reinforces well-being. However, should respect for autonomy put cared-fors at risk, an imposing care-giver could save the day. Spaid remarks:

For example, babies born to domesticated or zoo animals often require human intervention. To ignore a nonhuman mother's inadequacies is no less irresponsible than to refuse a human being's plea for help. Just as one acts to help a birthmother in such times of crisis, not acting to protect [nonhuman beings from potential] harms is wrong and ultimately detrimental to human life. (Spaid, 2016: 80-81)

It thus seems far easier to apply Saito's "Let it be" approach to non-living things than to living things at risk of dying. When well-being is the goal, it is far easier to assess whether carers' "care programs" truly benefit their designated cared-fors.

Even though principles associated with care ethics attempt to address/constrain care givers, it is difficult to monitor/evaluate actual outcomes. "High-minded" care-givers who aim to respect the "integrity and existence" of cared-fors undoubtedly uphold Saito's altruistic ideals, yet by emphasising carers' attitudes, we neglect the most significant aspect of care-giving, the distinctly *aesthetic* features that care aesthetics engenders. Care-giving manifests sensible properties that are felt, displayed and enhanced, even if they cannot be readily articulated or easily measured. Even the Spanish furniture restorer who "cleaned up" Bartolomé Esteban Murillo's *Immaculate Conception of Los Venerables* aimed for integrity, otherwise he would never have dared to enter into an agreement with its owner to restore such a renowned artwork. Despite the care-giver's ideals, care-giving either enhances well-being or triggers ill-being. Thus, the ethical dimension of care aesthetics is basic:

6. <<https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/loneliness-in-america>>.

7. <<https://nypost.com/2021/07/27/americans-have-fewer-friends-than-ever-before-study/>>.

“high-minded” care-givers who fail to boost the well-being of cared-fors merit disapprobation.

How care-givers direct their care reflects both an awareness of cared-fors’ values and their capacity to act on or enact said values. The problem is that notions of care are not *uniform* concepts, like veracity or smoothness. Rather, they are relative, like strength or speed. Given the qualitative differences between care-giving practices, the term “care” is no less an abstraction than “justice” or “rights”. It’s a variable that is not only interpreted differently by different carers and cared-fors, but it is typically evaluated from the perspective of the care-giver who has not only devoted his/her effort on behalf of another, but is the less vulnerable of the two, which augments his/her position in terms of defending his/her poor performance. I imagine many well-meaning care-givers following care regimen that we would be relieved to learn are not actually “ethically binding”. That is, they would hardly pass muster if tested under the “golden rule”, let alone the “categorical imperative”.

As must be clear by now, care ethics practitioners don’t always act as though their actions are binding. When care-givers select those responsibilities that they can capably accomplish, care is sure to be inconsistent and unevenly distributed, similar in effect to people’s personal environmental policies. In an effort to treat the planet as their “cared-for”, some people select only bio products, plant trees or implement strategies that enhance biodiversity, while others opt never to fly, drive short distances or store photos and emails long-term in carbon-intensive iClouds. There really is a disconnect between people’s personal environmental policies and their everyday actions. For example, 70% of American voters (up from 48% in 2017) want the US government to “take action to address climate change” (Milman, 2020), yet SUVs outsell cars by so much that the global energy savings resulting from greater energy efficiency of power plants has nearly been eclipsed by the greater fuel consumption of SUVs.<sup>8</sup> That people identify Earth as among their cared-fors yet prove insufficiently disciplined to act in accordance with their values exemplifies care ethics’ inconsistencies.

Ultimately, there’s no accounting for whom or what people care about. And it can change rather swiftly, depending on what people view as in their best interest and the benefits of caring or not. The only thing that “regulates” everyone’s actions is some combination of explicit values and widely accessible tools for evaluating whether people’s actions boost the well-being or ill-being of their cared-fors. In the end, our values are tied to our beliefs, which is why new values modify beliefs and vice versa. But changing our beliefs proves inordinately difficult, even when faced with evidence that capably challenges them.

8. <<https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=46537>>.

### 3. Putting the measurable metrics of care aesthetics into action

Rather than having to strategise effective ways to regulate care ethics, which sounds like an oxymoron since ethical practices are meant to be self-regulating, we ought to practice care aesthetics, whose material outcomes provide publicly accessible, measurable metrics that are not hidden in private relationships grounded in care ethics. While care ethics prescribes a normative relationship between a care-giver and a cared-for – a relationship that is presumed to be enriching for both – care aesthetics engenders an evaluative relationship between carers and cared-fors, which boosts numerous cared-for's well-being, even if only one carer exists.

Recognising that passers-by are more focused on beauty than on gardening practices meant to boost a garden's well-being, Nassauer was among the first to identify the need for a “recognisable landscape language that communicates human intention [...] particularly intention to care for the landscape,” or what she terms “cues to care” (Nassauer, 1995: 161). When she first addressed this topic, I doubt she was aware of Gilligan's critique of Kohlberg's six stages of morality, or was following feminist moral philosophy. Rather than positioning the gardener as a care-giver (for either the garden or its visitors), she assigns design the role of *signalling* to visitors the need to protect, appreciate and thus care for landforms they ordinarily neglect, dismiss or undervalue. She expects the addition of “cues to care” to prompt agency on the part of ordinary spectators, since too few people realise that “what is good may not look good” and “what looks good may not be good” (Nassauer, 1995: 161). Like care ethics, the cared-for signals recognition of the carer's efforts. However, the well-being of both the garden and its passers-by signals the care aesthetics practitioner's efforts.

In this case, “what is *good*” means “healthy”, what I term environmental well-being, as opposed to environmental ill-being. The fact that human beings typically find healthy landscapes less appealing than unhealthy ones has been a long-standing problem for gardeners and foresters aiming to improve the biodiversity of sites under their care. Scientists use the term biodiversity to describe variations “among taxa at multiple levels of ecological organisation: between and within populations, species, phylogenies, functional groups, trophic levels, food web levels, food web compartments and even habitat patches that explain landscape diversity” (Hines et al., 2015: 162). These days, scientists consider biodiversity an indicator of both human well-being and environmental well-being (Naem et al., 2016). Elsewhere, I have used the term “biodiverse beauty” to distinguish landscapes whose greater biodiversity, rather than their appearance, indicates the territory's “true beauty”, since biodiversity is an indicator of ecosystem functioning (Spaid, 2020: 173-176). To evaluate ecosystem functioning, scientists measure biodiversity, entropy levels, soil fertility/organic life, sustainability/growth and habitat/food.

Nassauer realises that the line between attractive and unattractive gardens is a fine one, bordering on human intentionality or spectators' awareness of



such intentions. The “look of care” matters greatly (Nassauer, 1995: 165). She remarks how “cues to care” (mowing, maintenance, pruning) help to frame novel ecosystems in inhabited landscapes. Moreover, “cues to care make the novel familiar and associate ecosystems that may look messy with unmistakable indications that the landscape is part of a larger intended pattern” (Nassauer, 1995: 167). Additionally, sustainable gardening requires cues to care in order to gain long-term adherents, who are likely to transfer allegiances to future generations. In most cases, “cues to care” engender a greater awareness and interest in something that might otherwise tender public protests. Not unlike Gilligan, Nassauer’s notion of care is relational, viz. human beings, their environments and the designers who create/instigate said environments.

Unlike the word gardener, which means a person who tends a garden as a pastime or for a living, the word curator comes from the Latin verb *curare* (to care). I distinguish curators, whose actions are guided by their roles as “care-takers” (as in taking care of artworks, artists, audiences or the institutions that they serve) from exhibition makers/organisers, whose professional titles do not commit them to services bound by external considerations (Spaid, 2015). Curators are hardly the only artistic directors engaged in care aesthetics. This approach applies equally to artistic directors, whether conductors, theatre/film directors, architects or editors/publishers, whose professional duties require them to protect and enact the creative intentions/desires/needs/wishes of others. Thus, artists, performers and audience members are all effectively cared-for, though boosting audience well-being often proves rather difficult, since even a brilliant performance may leave some audience members feeling perturbed. Like gardeners attending to plants, artistic directors tend to focus more on performers’ well-being.

My point here is that care aesthetics as practiced by art directors is horizontal (not hierarchical), since it is not based on the powerful/able caring for the less powerful/able, but on artistic directors who are keenly aware that doing their job well requires working alongside peers (performers or actors) to present novel interpretations of artworks (texts, scripts, scores, movies, artworks, etc.). Moreover, care aesthetics as practiced by artistic directors demonstrates that the ethical dimension of care aesthetics is relational. Whatever actions the artistic director ought to take are delineated by specific contexts, whereas abstract values such as community, connection or immanence associated with care ethics prove insufficient on their own. By contrast, exacting interpretations are bound by often implicit/sometimes explicit demands made by artworks, artists, audiences and institutions, such as budgetary resources.

While care ethics is primarily top-down (someone less precarious caring for someone more precarious), care aesthetics, as practiced by gardeners, artistic directors and care-givers, is directed towards empowering people to value/appreciate and/or care for/protect places and subjects – whether landscapes, artworks or living beings – that might otherwise be neglected. Moreover, care aesthetics incorporates the view that human beings don’t always know what they like, or what Melchionne terms “aesthetic unreliability” (Melchionne,

2011). So long as human beings don't necessarily know their preferences, "cues to care" go a long way towards directing audiences' thoughts towards attributes they might appreciate, if only their attentions were thus directed.

Although aesthetics is a primary aspect of care aesthetics, it remains surprisingly (or unsurprisingly) untethered to notions of beauty and taste. That is, gardeners, artistic directors and care-givers more generally identify ideas, concepts, intentions, meanings and values more or less independently of taste, preferences, attractiveness or formal considerations, in order to successfully boost the well-being of cared-fors. As a result, passers-by, audiences and/or spectators also gain access to experiences, insights and memories that they don't encounter when carers establish beauty as the desired goal for their cared-for. Although my version of care aesthetics diverges slightly from Saito's, both views address reciprocity (Saito, 2022). For her, the "capacity to appreciate expressions of care and to express care is both an ethical and aesthetic task for all of us" (Saito, 2020: 187), whereas my version frames care aesthetics as exhibiting material features that offer measurable metrics. Otherwise care aesthetics risks the same problem that lies at the heart of care ethics, that is, subjective standards.

Moreover, the measurable aspects of care aesthetics question the tendency to attribute values such as "beauty", since doing so effectively overrides the significance of the "right", "good" and "true", all factors that clearly direct care aesthetics and thus ought to guide ethical action. Landscape architect Robert Ribe carried out a survey of:

botanists at the University of Wisconsin who were successfully engaged in guiding the national forests of that state to begin deliberately planning for biodiversity. Afterwards, one of them said that "scenic beauty" was not what she wanted to manage the national forests for because a beautiful forest is not necessarily a *good* or a *true* forest [my emphasis]. (Kiester, 1997: 160)

Ribe affirms her worry:

[S]he was arguably *right* in as much as an old growth forest with woody debris and an understory in that survey was seen as less beautiful than an even-aged, park-like grass and tree-monoculture forest maintained by grazing.[...] An ecologically *unhealthy* [my emphasis] landscape can be beautiful, at least for a time and thereby gain public acceptance. Aesthetic value in its strongest, most compelling form can have as much to do with the content as the form of a place. (Ribe, 1997: 160)

In privileging ecologically *healthy* landscapes, care aesthetics harnesses biodiverse beauty to render unimaginable forms of beauty whose well-being reflects a measurable metric for successful care-giving.

#### 4. From non-aesthetic (material) to aesthetic (immaterial) concepts and back again!

So long as contemporary aesthetics views balance, harmony, order and unity more as expressions of aesthetic appreciation than as scientific knowledge, well-being too risks being an aesthetic concept rather than a non-aesthetic one. It is thus relevant to review how the ancient Greeks cast the body, the soul and notions such as balance, harmony, order and unity in *material* terms:

Cheerfulness is created for men through moderation of enjoyment and *harmoniousness* [my emphasis] of life. (Democritus, Fragment 191)

Harmony is perhaps a more adequate description of [the world's] nature than either measure or logos, for harmony shows the inevitable relation to opposites, the holding in balance of forces at odds with one another; in a word, the central connection of permanence with transience. (Lippman, 1963: 10)

Even mathematical details, such as the law according to which human births are best regulated, are often in some degree harmonic in nature; but most symptomatic of all, the central concept of *justice*, traditionally conceived as a *temporal balance and compensation*, turns out upon investigation to be a form of harmony. (Lippman, 1963: 30)

As these quotes indicate, the ancient Greeks described harmony and balance as measurable metrics. For example, Democritus described the body's response to physical inputs such as alcohol or psychological inputs such as guilt or shame in terms of the *harmony* of the soul, which he envisioned was comprised of atoms aligned like a crystal lattice, such that if one atom shifts, the whole form is destabilised. Since every person has a different "constitution", each person's soul atoms respond differently to external inputs.

[I]n the fragmentary writings of Democritus, both social harmony and also the joy that results from a harmonious life appear in a completely figurative light, since they are unaccompanied by any cosmological or mathematical conceptions of harmony. (Lippman, 1963: 28-29)

Philosopher of music Edward Lippman (1920-2010) tied this approach to Alcmaeon of Croton, a physician active in the early 5th century B.C., who lived in southern Italy and "described health as a balance and a proportionate mixture of qualities in the body; the commensurability of the paired opposites in the mixture was based on the simple relation of equality" (Lippman, 1963: 25). Lippman elaborated upon the concrete nature of the soul:

An important theory of the harmony of the soul is advanced in Plato's *Phaedo* by the Theban Simmias, who is a disciple of Philolaus. He maintains that the soul is a harmony of the body and illustrates his meaning by comparing

the body to a lyre. Although the idea is materialistic, it is not completely unable to account for certain cherished properties of the soul; even though Simmias makes harmony dependent upon physical materials, he recognises its incorporeal and divine nature. The conception is thoroughly Pythagorean as far as number and harmony are concerned, but it is quite the contrary in its insistence on the soul's mortality, curiously contradicting the Pythagorean belief in metempsychosis. The physical world becomes a basis of explanation in a realm long since recognised as fundamentally different and that is why Socrates (the man chiefly responsible for formulating the Western concept of the soul) advances a series of detailed refutations. These cannot be taken to imply, of course, that he opposes the notion that the soul is harmonic or harmonious in nature; he takes issue only with the particular idea that the body furnishes the elements of such a harmony. (Lippman, 1963: 26-27)

Finally, Lippman identified this thread running through the last chapter of Plato's *Republic*:

Sensory and synesthetic elements are a distinctive feature of the myth of Er in *Republic* Book X; the vision of the rotating wheels of the world is a post-mortem experience of a warrior killed in battle. The music actually sounds and the tones are connected with visual impressions, particularly with colours. Appropriately, the Sirens and not the Muses preside over the cosmic music. The intrusion into a cosmological picture of perceptible rather than purely intelligible factors can be explained without great difficulty. It is due doubtless to the fact that to the soul freed from the body, rational apprehension takes on the character of immediate perception. (Lippman, 1963: 16)

By contrast, post-war aestheticians, most notably Frank Sibley, seemed to be at such a loss for words when faced with the art of their day that they adopted the practice of deferring to what he termed "aesthetic concepts", which refer to *aesthetic*, rather than physical properties (Sibley, 1959). He considered aesthetic concepts such as "balanced", "delicate", "grim", "graceful" or "unified" useful for expressing aesthetic appreciation when there is evidence, though not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence between the aesthetic concept and the experienced form. By contrast, Sibley termed measurable properties such as shape, structure or colour as "non-aesthetic concepts" since they are physical descriptions. I imagine that aesthetic concepts, whose use seems totally *fay* today, arose to convey ineffable feelings for artworks lacking useful genres, whether "surreal" or "minimal", that spontaneously illuminate relevant features. Categorising artworks in any meaningful way can take decades. No doubt, aesthetic concepts provide critics with explanatory power until the artwork "achieves" what Arthur Danto termed its work (Danto, 1984: 125).

Yet another immaterial property is what Ted Gracyk terms "emergent features", since they emerge from the object's other features. They are emergent because if other features change, they can be lost. He offers the example of a piece of wet pottery that loses its shape as it dries and therefore loses its "grace-

fulness”, yet retains its colour and weight. “With perceptible, emergent properties, you have to perceive other properties first, as the basis of perceiving the emergent ones” (Gracyk, 2010/2019). Moreover, “the primary proof that they are present in something is that qualified judges converge in agreement about it; long-lasting convergence is a very solid proof” (Gracyk, 2010/2019). So long as aesthetic concepts such as balance, harmony, order and unity are deemed emergent, evaluative, immaterial yet still objective, they seem useless for conveying well-being, especially environmental well-being.

In trying to assess how the Ancient Greek focus on non-aesthetic concepts or measurable properties gave way to contemporary aestheticians’ privileging of aesthetic concepts, I discovered that what Vitruvius originally considered to be the ultimate synthesis (commodity, firmness and delight) eventually split apart, enabling 18th-century architectural aestheticians to change their preference for the measurable *firmitas* (structural stability) to the immeasurable *venustas* (attractive appearance). However, Le Corbusier’s equating architectural beauty with “harmonious proportions, mathematically conceived” paved the way for harmony to regain its originally measurable properties.

## 5. Well-being’s role for epistemology, ethics, everyday aesthetics and communities

### 5.1. Epistemology

As if to “rematerialise” formerly aesthetic terms, Alan Carlson notes how “[L]inking the appreciation of nature to scientific knowledge explains how positive aesthetic appreciation is nurtured by a scientific worldview that increasingly interprets the natural world as having positive aesthetic qualities, such as order, balance, unity and harmony” (Carlson, 2020). One suddenly notices that entropy measures order, ecosystem functioning indicates balance, resilience suggests harmony and adaptation denotes unity, all of which avail additional metrics for evaluating a cared-for’s well-being. Well-being thus offers epistemic value.

### 5.2. Ethics

Keen to ground aesthetics in ethics, Saito argues that it is possible to express moral virtues aesthetically. She juxtaposes her position against ethical views that are “rule-governed” and thus claim to be objective, rational, fair, impartial and universal, as exemplified by justice and rights. She considers sensitivity, thoughtfulness, gentleness and respect to exemplify aesthetic values that have a moral dimension (Saito, 2020). To her list, I would add the value of generosity, the quintessential value that melds the aesthetic to the moral. As noted early on, she also emphasises reciprocity and encourages us to appreciate others as they are, rather than imposing our ideas on another. Saito says so much when she remarks that we ought to accept another’s existence and integrity.

Although I share Saito's view that care aesthetics exemplifies ethical action, my approach expresses moral virtues in terms of well-being's measurable metrics, otherwise care itself remains a rather non-standard, subjective notion.

### 5.3. *Everyday Aesthetics*

Like care ethics such that an individual agent cares for a particular person, Saito's version of care aesthetics tends to characterise an individual agent who cares for a singular cared-for, whether a tree, a painting or a tea-cup. Her privileging the making of/taking care of objects and rituals coheres with everyday aesthetics' ties to John Dewey's notion of the "esthetic". According to Dewey:

The word "esthetic" refers [...] to experience as appreciative, perceiving and enjoying. It denotes the consumer's rather than the producer's standpoint. It is gusto, taste; and, as with cooking, overt skilful action is on the side of the cook who prepares, while taste is on the side of the consumer, as in gardening there is a distinction between the gardener who plants and tills and the householder who enjoys the finished product. (Dewey, 2005: 49)

Although Dewey discusses care in *Art as Experience* (1934), he ignores well-being. He notes how we hunt out things like rugs and pots because we appreciate the care with which they were fashioned.

Craftsmanship to be artistic in the final sense must be "loving"; it must care deeply for the subject matter upon which skill is exercised. [...] The doing or making is artistic when the perceived result is of such a nature that *its* qualities *as perceived* have controlled the question of construction. (Dewey, 2005: 49-50)

Called to care aesthetically, care-givers too are driven to assess the best way to boost the well-being of their cared-fors. Here Dewey seems to concur with my notion of aesthetic care whereby aesthetic understanding, grounded in scientific knowledge, guides the care-givers' assessment.

It is a commonplace that we cannot direct, save accidentally, the growth and flowering of plants, however lovely and enjoyed, without understanding their causal conditions. It should be just a commonplace that esthetic understanding—as distinct from sheer personal enjoyment—must start with the soil, air and light out of which things esthetically admirable arise. And these conditions are the conditions and factors that make an ordinary experience complete. (Dewey, 2005: 12)

When well-being is the goal, not only does care lose its ambiguous or abstract character, but accepting another's existence and integrity is part and parcel of the programme.

#### 5.4. Community

Rudolf Steiner's vision of a community's spiritual mission explains how care aesthetics, as initiated by a carer, expands into teamwork, such that a group cares for this farm, that park, these artworks or this community. In 1919, Steiner published *Toward Social Renewal: Rethinking the Basis of Society*, which introduced his Fundamental Social Law:

The *well-being* [my emphasis] of a community of people working together will be the greater, the less the individual claims for himself the proceeds of his work, i.e., the more of these proceeds he makes over to his fellow-workers, the more his own needs are satisfied, not out of his own work but out of the work done by others. (Steiner, 1993)

Steiner adds, "Every community must have a spiritual mission and each individual must have the will to contribute towards the fulfilling of this mission". Echoing the spiritual dimension of Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, whose literal translation from Greek is good (from εὖς) spirit (from δαίμων), he added this proto-poem, which some regard as his personal motto:

The healthy social life is found  
When in the mirror of each human soul  
The whole community is shaped,  
And when in the community  
Lives the strength of each human soul  
(Steiner, 1993)

What's astonishing is that care aesthetics augments the well-being of the many, especially when the "whole community" springs into action. My research into ameliorative practices indicates that efforts taken to boost well-being generally follow six action steps:

- 1) Some actor-producer proposes an alternative mode of being; which
- 2) he/she publicly shares with others via an exhibition, workshop and /or performance; 3) prompting actor-recipients to envision a better world; that
- 4) compels them to implement specific actions; 5) indicative of their new-found capacities, skills and values; thus 6) spawning greater cooperation and self-empowerment for all involved. (Spaid, 2017: 215)

It is well documented that sculptor Joseph Beuys was highly influenced by Steiner, who published *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* (translated into English as *The Philosophy of Spiritual Action*) in 1894. I imagine Beuys channelling Steiner when he organised his 1971 forest action, in which he and fellow artists assembled with brooms in an urban forest to protest its being razed to make way for tennis courts. One soon recognises that ameliorative practices tend to cycle through the same action steps, each with a particular function that generates new capabilities meant to enhance well-being. Either the cycle is repeat-

ed or it snow-balls into something unimaginable. Suddenly, the relationship between each of the above six steps and its resultant skillset emerges: 1) Agency enables doubt (resisting popular views); 2) participation engenders knowledge sharing; 3) envisioning together enables people to imagine alternative possibilities, 4) DIWO ethos (Do It With Others) leads to working with others to strategise fundraising and logistics; 5) action results in implementation/fulfilment; and finally 6) self-empowerment/autarchy (repeat).

Care-givers who carry out ameliorative practices double as “agents of perceptual change” since such procedures reorient the community’s preconceptions and perspectives (Spaid, 2002). What interests me here is the way actions originally meant as healing acts incidentally facilitate survival skills. Melchionne recognises such fringe-benefits as the “valuable compensatory role” of everyday aesthetic practices (Melchionne, 2014). This rarely goes the other way around, since one’s acquiring survival skills doesn’t necessarily foster well-being. For example, being an expert marksman rarely offers “compensatory values”, since superior skills don’t necessarily assuage whatever fears/concerns drive people to require self-protection. By contrast, brainstorming processes engender a sense of belonging. Engaging in teamwork facilitates trust. Experiencing well-being boosts confidence. Those who endure will see goals through to completion. Those who learn how to modify/moderate goals conserve energy. Those whose glasses are half full/empty transform their futures into opportunities/losses. Those who treat problems as opportunities for solutions continue advancing forward.

### 5.5. *Citizen Scientists*

One aspect that is often overlooked is the feeling of well-being felt by citizen scientists (carers) engaged in species counts, where registering biodiversity doubles as caring for cared-fors. Species counts are a kind of human action, a viable response to degradation whose results reflect inhabitants’ real time, lived experiential gains, rather than moral retribution (Ryan and Riordan, 2000). What’s more, freely performed and self-concordant actions such as counting species and reporting one’s results have been shown to boost citizen scientists’ feelings of “attachment to place” (Ganzevoort et al., 2017: 2824). Citizen scientists consider themselves custodians, rather than owners of the data they’ve collected (Ganzevoort et al., 2017: 2821). Such experiences positively impact the well-being of care-givers, whose capacities are enhanced as they gain access to the scientific community.

## 6. Conclusion

Rather than claiming to be normative or binding like care ethics, care aesthetics aims to secure human and non-human well-being. As already noted, care ethics addresses right *action*, in the sense that we have a moral responsibility to carry out particular duties to others. Focused on well-being, care



aesthetics entails right *existence*, such that the well-being of the cared-for is boosted, as indicated by metrics associated with balance, endurance, harmony, flourishing, order and unity, all manifest features that have material properties. For example, care-givers tending a bio-intensive permaculture garden nourish human and non-human beings alike. When well-being is optimised, the urban farm is sustainable and thus requires fewer additional resources (fossil fuels, fertilisers/pesticides and irrigation) and far less human effort to produce nearly the same yields as conventional agriculture.<sup>9</sup> Known for maximising biodiversity, bio-intensive permaculture gardens boost the well-being of many more species.

Care aesthetics thus enables aestheticians to grasp originally Greek notions of balance, harmony, order and unity in material terms that reflect ecosystem functioning, resilience, entropy and adaption, respectively. This is biodiverse beauty at work, but it's also well-being in the making. Rather than dismissing outright material properties as non-aesthetic concepts, we need to reconsider how material properties thus boost the well-being of many more cared-fors.

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