Maria Montessori's Moral Epistemology

Solving the Problem of Moral Relativism

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Patrick Frierson has delved deeply into Montessori's history to establish her rightful place among the pantheon of philosophers. He has achieved his aim 'to provide Montessorians with a philosophically rigorous account of the basis for Montessori's moral commitments'. He appreciates Montessori's practical aims — that 'children reveal their true nature — including their moral sensibility — only in healthy prepared environments conducive to freely chosen activity'. He writes, 'For Montessori, moral theory [...] comes from observation of living and developing human beings and sensitivity to what is good and what is evil in their daily lives.' The article is very comfortable for those who understand philosophical vocabulary like metaphysics, teleology, moral pluralism, moral relativism, epistemology, etc. But the intellectual roots are analytical. In contrast, Montessori's legacy terms are emotional, social, and spiritual, focused on the development of children and geared to the practice of teaching children. Frierson's article is sincere in trying to find Montessori's real intellectual correlations. His excellent tools of ethics and moral training and his research validate Montessori's philosophical assumptions. Montessori's legacy is naturally connected to the discipline of ethics and Frierson seeks to prove it. Montessori's proponents will appreciate the fine tuning of researchers and academicians that makes her writing more credible to the university. Her classical understanding of the child from birth to adulthood is paramount while her methods are aligned with contemporary practice.

Maria Montessori is not generally known as a philosopher. She is best known for the Montessori schools around the world that bear her name, and for her (oft-misunderstood) pedagogical ideas about children's liberty. But after completing her medical degree and spending several years in professional medicine and psychiatry, including working with children, Montessori left most of her professional responsibilities to enrol in a PhD programme in philosophy at the University of Rome, in order, as she put it, to 'undertake the study of [...] the principles on which [pedagogy] is based' (MM 33; DC 2: 23).[1] There she studied under philosophers such as Giacomo Barzelloti (for history of philosophy); Pietro Ragnisco (moral philosophy); and one of the most important Italian philosophers of the early twentieth century, Antonio Labriola; not to mention philosophically inclined psychologists and anthropologists (Trabalzini 2003, Foschi 2012). At the same time, her personal interest in psychology intersected with Italian interest in American pragmatism, particularly William James, whose philosophical-psychological writings she cites throughout her works. By the end of her life, Montessori had put her philosophical background to work; the Italian editors of her *Education and Peace* could rightly say, 'Once a firm basis for her theories had been established through practical experience, her thoughts as [...] a philosopher ranged further and unveiled new perspectives that seem broader and broader as time goes by' (EP 10: vii). Despite her background and sophistication, Montessori's philosophical thought has not been taken seriously. At most, some have focused on her philosophy *of education*, and there has been some discussion of her feminism (Babini and Lama 2000, Babini 2000) and her place in the history of psychology (Babini, Foschi, Kramer, Trabalzini).

Through providing an overview of her moral epistemology, the present essay aims to show that Montessori is a philosopher worth taking seriously.

Moral epistemology refers to the theory of how one comes to know moral truths. Some philosophers (nihilists) have claimed that there are no moral truths to be known, others (relativists) that moral norms are wholly culturally determined. The predominant philosophical accounts of moral knowledge today appeal to rational argument or moral 'intuitions' or some sort of 'moral sense' that gives insight into moral aspects of the world. In this paper, I show how Montessori fits into this last group; she develops a moral sense theory that incorporates her insight that all

Montessori shows how all senses are open to cultivation.

the senses — including the moral sense — are grounded in basic human capacities but dependent upon both specific interest in the objects of sensory attention and the cultivation of those senses through directed practice in a well-ordered environment.

I then raise the problem of moral relativism as an issue for moral sense theory in general and Montessori's in particular. From nearly the start of her career, Montessori sought a global reach for her pedagogy. She developed her philosophy with the world as her audience, a legacy that continues in initiatives such as the Association Montessori Internationale's *Educateurs sans Frontières* initiative (see https://montessori-esf.org/). While attuned to real cultural differences, she also claimed to find moral phenomena that transcended culture: 'The "human personality" belongs to all human beings. Europeans, Indians, and Chinese, etc. are all men.[2] If therefore certain vital conditions are found to be a help to the human personality, these concern and affect the inhabitants of all nations' (FM 3: 6). Here I show how Montessori's response to relativism involves a meta-physically rooted conception of moral perfection but ultimately leads her to the child as the one who can 'reveal to us' the essence of 'morality as a fact of life' (1938: 83).

Because her moral epistemology permeates her philosophy of (moral) education, the present paper often draws from pedagogical contexts to elaborate the underlying epistemology, and a better understanding of her epistemology can enrich the theory and practice of education. In that sense, this paper both uses Montessori's pedagogy to better understand moral epistemology and uses the practices of philosophy to more clearly elucidate a central feature of Montessori's pedagogy. I hope to thereby provide Montessorians with a philosophically rigorous account of the basis for Montessori's moral commitments. [3] My conclusion briefly highlights two important practical implications for Montessori educators.

1 Ethical Empiricism and the Moral Sense

Elsewhere, I have discussed Montessori's 'interested empiricist' epistemology, according to which all knowledge begins from sense experience, but that experience requires taking an interest in the world (see Frierson 2014 and Frierson 2019). Knowledge depends upon experiencing aspects of the world that particularly interest one, and both interest and sensory acuity can be cultivated. For this reason,

Montessori prepared environments are filled with sensorial materials designed to foster children's focused attention.

Consistent with this general emphasis on sensorial education, Montessori identifies the ultimate source of *moral* knowledge as a moral *sense*. Her fullest statement of this moral sense theory comes in early pedagogy lectures and is worth quoting at length:

> Education of the senses is the foundation of the entire intellectual organism and might be called the intellectual raw material [...] In [...] the moral realm, another form of sensitivity exists which I argue is fundamental, in an absolute sense, to moral education, just as the education of the senses is fundamental to the education of the intellect: we have a special inner sensitivity to something which we judge to be good, or bad. And this judgment, which is later made by reasoning, we have already made through an inner sensation or something which can be compared to sensation. We experienced a feeling of joy, of peace and tranquility, in certain moments, and at other times we felt remorse and realized the lack of peace and inner joy.
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> The word *conscience* is today used by psychologists in a broad manner when they speak of the mind. Moralists and theologians instead limit it to this sort of inner sensory organ, if we may call it thus, *sine materia*, which gives us these sensations of pleasure and pain, which are sensations of good and bad.
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> We can say that just as light and darkness, a harmonious note and strident sound affect, in opposite ways, are evident to our external organs of sense, so there are facts and reactions which affect conscience, this inner sensibility. This idea is certainly not mine; it is the oldest idea of moralists and theologians. I do, however, contend that this idea does not carry much weight in the field of pedagogy and child education.
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> To keep alive this power of feeling, to refine it, is the basis of moral education. In society we see people who speak of morality, but who may have lost their sensibility. Indeed we often look with amazement at human beings who are on a high intellectual plane and speak of morals and who yet have a certain lack of moral sensitiveness [...].
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> (Rome 18: 260–61; see Adol 1: 5–6; London 17: 204)

While she claims no particular philosophical profundity in her view that moral discernment is due to an inner moral sense, Montessori's parallel between this sense and the outer senses, combined with her particular brand of empiricism regarding the outer senses, provides her with a moral epistemology that is original, plausible, and well-integrated into her holistic pedagogical project. The aim of this paper is to elucidate that moral epistemology.

Montessori treats moral appraisal as continuous with perception, but she does more than simply assert a moral sense. Earlier moral sense philosophers, such as the eighteenth-century philosophers Francis Hutcheson and David Hume claimed that the perception of the 'good' is a kind of pleasure, and Montessori largely agrees with this assessment. Unlike those theorists, however, she identifies the distinctive feel of moral appraisal as essentially 'joy, [...] peace and tranquillity' rather than bare pleasure. Moreover, while these earlier theorists tended to explain this pleasure exclusively in terms of empathy with others' pleasures and pains, Montessori allows that people can directly appraise situations in terms of their moral qualities.

Montessori's broader epistemology is also unlike more traditional empiricists in seeing all senses as active rather than purely passive. Just as one must actively attend to sensorial materials in order to perceive distinctions between shades of colour or differences in texture, and one will only attend to those materials when one takes an interest in them, so too the perception of moral distinctions depends upon a particular *interest* in and thereby *sensitivity* to features of situations. No level of harmony in music can be perceived without *attending* to the music, and — as I have argued elsewhere (see Frierson 2014: 5–6, 22; Frierson 2019) — even differences between light and dark depend upon some interest in those features of one's visual world. Montessori extends this point to the moral sense; without an interest in the morally salient features of one's situation, one will not immediately 'sense' good or bad.

Moreover, unlike traditional empiricists, Montessori shows how all senses are open to *cultivation*, particularly during special *sensitive periods*, and to degradation or loss, if not properly cultivated. Previous philosophers like David Hume erred by seeing the senses as basically fixed instruments for receiving impressions of the world, and they made a similar mistake in morals. They saw the fundamental mechanisms of the moral sense — sympathy for Hume, or the brute moral sense for Hutcheson — as fixed in human nature. For Montessori, the moral sense is, *like other senses*, something that must be exercised in the right context in order to cultivate, refine, and preserve it. 'To know how to keep this inner sensibility alight and to refine it, this is our principal task' (Rome 18: 263; cf. Adol 12: 13). Just as children must work with sensorial materials to preserve, cultivate, and foster their sight or smell or hearing, so too they must actively observe and engage in moral situations in order to preserve, cultivate, and foster their moral sense.

Thus Montessori asks, 'How can we educate this sense?' and, consistent with her pedagogical method in general, she insists that the view that 'we can make people moral by talking of morality' is an 'illusion' (Rome 18: 262): 'it is not

by philosophizing or discussing metaphysical conceptions that the morals of mankind can be developed: it is by activity, by experience, and by action' (Adol 12: 83; cf. 1938: 83–87). Moral education requires 'auto-education' (Rome 18: 262), albeit one within which (as in the case of sensory education) the teacher should carefully prepare an environment for activity in a social context and may appropriately teach the vocabulary associated with the child's (inner) perceptions. Just as one cultivates children's visual acuity by providing them with examples of different colours and words to associate with those colours — 'This is blue; this is yellow' — so too one cultivates *moral* acuity with carefully chosen examples of moral realities and appropriately simple terms to describe these examples: 'A teacher who says [...] "this is good" and "this is bad" safeguards them in the most delicate way possible from evil, permitting them to develop freely in what is good without in any way placing obstacles. This teacher, if not giving moral education, at least begins to educate "moral sensory organs" and classify the facts of moral conscience' (Rome 18: 263). Crucially, the teachers' statement that 'this is good' is not instruction in *what things are good*, any more than her statement that 'this is blue' is an instruction in what things are blue. In both cases, the child must be presented with cases that stimulate his interest in the quality to be perceived — the moral goodness of the deed, or the colour of the material — and then he must recognize these traits himself. The teacher merely provides a *word* for what the child has already recognized. Thus we 'need to be acutely aware to respect all the inner acts of children's sentiment' (Rome 18: 264), not seeking to project our concepts of good and bad but only to provide occasions for the exercise of his moral sense.

Fundamental to Montessori's moral pedagogy, then, is the provision of well-ordered occasions for moral reflection, particularly through social interactions: 'the growing sentiment of the conscience of the individual [...] develops through and by means of social experiences' (Adol 12: 84). Even when one helps children formulate moral principles, one should always only 'giv[e] moral principles *together with social experiences*' (1938: 87, emphasis added). Her classrooms are social spaces with opportunities for self-cultivation but also for conflict and cooperation, solidarity and social friction.

> There is only one specimen of each object, and if a piece is in use when another child wants it, the latter—if he is normalized—will wait for it to be released. Important social qualities derive from this. The child comes to see that he must respect the work of others, not because someone has said that he must, but because this is a reality that he meets in his daily experience. There is only one between many children, so there is nothing for it but to wait. [...] We cannot teach this kind of morality to children of three, but experience can.
> (AbsMind 1: 202–03)
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> In these social relations [that regularly take place in the classroom], there are many moments in which children's moral sensibility is put to the test. The teacher can direct, seeking to direct with the same purpose to keep on refining this inner sensitivity. You will say, 'How can this sensibility be given and refined?' That is impossible, it cannot be done, if it does not [already] exist. It would be like setting ourselves the problem, "what shall we do so that children should see the red [and] the green if children do not see it?" If children do not see it, you cannot make them see it. Children see—that is why they are capable of education. Do not preoccupy yourselves with children's sight in this sense, for they have inherited it and it is because they do have it that you can educate it. And how to educate it? Make them see the red and the white. But do you create the red and the white? No, these colours are everywhere. There we call attention to the red and the white and we say, 'This is the red and this is the white' [...] Moral life should be presented in the same way.
> (Rome 18: 265–66, cf. London 17: 236–37)

Just as Montessori teachers focus children's attention on particular qualities of external senses, and their classrooms are filled with materials that cultivate the outer senses in deliberate, graded, and ordered ways; so too they focus on creating conditions for moral perception. Thus there are a limited number of materials of each type (typically only one) and a large number of students, so that students are faced with competing desires for materials and must learn to recognize appropriate and inappropriate ways of handling scarce resources in a carefully delimited context. They regularly face opportunities for cooperative work but also potential conflict, both of which prompt moral consciousness. Throughout daily life, children's abilities to recognize morally salient features of situations and to appropriately sense good and bad responses to those situations depend upon capacities for moral perception, which capacities increase — like all senses — through 'exercise' (London 17: 237).

Crucially, for Montessori, the teacher's ability to set up an environment that allows children to cultivate *their own* moral sense is essential if *morally good* actions are to also be *autonomous expressions of agency*. For Montessori, one reconciles freedom with morality when—and only when—one acts in the light of moral ideals that one sees for oneself.[4] As in all cultivation of the senses, this depends upon having the right sorts of experiences during specific developmental 'sensitive' periods:

> Powerful among [children's] instincts is the social drive. It has been our experience that if the child and the adolescent do not have a chance to engage in a true social life, they do not develop a sense of discipline and morality. These gifts in their case become end products of coercion rather than manifestations of freedom. The human personality is shaped by continuous experiences; it is up to us to create for children, for adolescents, for young people an environment, a world that will readily permit such formative experiences. […] Thus from early childhood on, human beings must have practical experience of what association is.
> (EP 10: 28–29)

After childhood, people can be brought to self-discipline and 'morality' in the sense of respect for others. But they will be brought to these through "coercion" of some sort. Most often, the relevant coercion will involve literal force or the threat of force (in the case of civil laws or divine commands) or appeals to honour and vanity (as with social pressures and the allocation of esteem) or by means of compromises made for the sake of self-interest (anticipating reciprocation or operating within various implicit or explicit social contracts).[5] As opposed to those who 'are always feeling tempted […], need moral support to protect them from temptation […][and so] impose rules upon themselves to save them from falling', those whose moral sense is well-cultivated are 'stronger types' for whom 'Perfection attracts them because it is in their nature. Their search for it is not sacrificial, but is pursued as if it satisfied their deepest longings' (AbsMind 1: 189–90).[6] The most autonomous expressions of agency come from that wholehearted (cf. Frankfurt 2004) commitment to the good that arises when one sees what is good about self-discipline and mutual respect and reflectively endorses (and even expands) that insight in the light of reason. Such a person is truly moral, and truly free.

2 Value Pluralism and the Moral Sense

Ethical pluralism poses an important challenge to moral sense theories. David Hume confronted this problem, and his friend and fellow moral sense theorist Adam Smith, a philosopher most famous for his economic treatise *The Wealth of Nations*, wrote a whole book on the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part V of which is wholly dedicated to the problem of pluralism. For ethical theories grounded on rational arguments of one sort or another, pluralism might be easier to address, but if one bases ethical prescriptions on moral sense, and if people's moral senses *differ*, then morality — at least of any universal kind — is seemingly undermined at its root. The problem might seem *particularly* severe for Montessori, who argues that moral sense can and should be cultivated in the course of education. If different educations give rise to different moral senses, there seems no legitimate standard by which to define an 'ideal' for moral pedagogy. Thus Montessori takes quite seriously the problem of an ethical relativism that considers 'morality […] as something that varies according to the epochs of time and the conditions of life' (1938: 81).

To begin with, Montessori admits that humans' moral sensibilities are modified to considerable degrees by our cultural contexts: 'things are established by social groups. For example, habits and customs which finally become imbued with the force of morals […] Morals are a superstructure of social life, which fixes them in determinate form' (AbsMind 1: 169). Moral pluralism — as a descriptive claim about humans' sensibilities — is simply a fact about the world. Moreover, this fact is grounded in a psychological trait that lies at the very core of Montessori's pedagogical method: the absorbent mind.

> Nothing has more importance for us than this absorbent form of mind, which shapes the adult and adapts him to any kind of social order […] On this, the whole of our study is based. […] We can therefore understand how the child, thanks to his particular psyche, absorbs the customs and habits of the land in which he lives until he has formed the typical individual of his place and time. […] Thus the respect for life in India is so great that animals also are included in a veneration firmly rooted in the hearts of the people. So deep a sentiment can never be acquired by people already grown up. Just to say: 'Life is worthy of respect', does not make this feeling ours. I might think the Indians were right; that I also should respect animals. But in me this would only be a piece of reasoning; it would not stir my emotions. That kind of veneration which Indians have for the cow, for example, we Europeans can never experience. Nor can the native Indian, reason as he may, ever rid himself of it. […] Every personal trait absorbed by the child becomes fixed forever, and even if reason later disclaims it, something of it remains in the subconscious mind.
> (AbsMind 1: 56–57)

Moral pluralism is *deep*, affecting the cores of people's personalities. And pluralism is *wide*, affecting all people at *all* times; being human depends upon absorbing culture deeply. And absorbed cultural values are *ineradicable*, at least at the level of moral perception. The adult Indian will always *feel* that killing life is wrong, even if she comes to reflectively reject that moral belief.

Nonetheless, and despite affirming that pluralism in some respects can be better than 'stupid […] uniform[ity]' (SA 9: 109),

Montessori insists that avoiding the relativism towards which pluralism might seem to lead is both possible and important. The possibility is based in part on a teleological-normative metaphysics, within which human capacities exist for certain ends and can and should be cultivated towards those ends (see §3), and in part on optimism about 'the child' as 'a great assistance in understanding this question of morality' (1938: 81; see §4). The importance is based on two fundamental concerns, a practical politico-social concern for relations amongst diverse human beings and a properly philosophical concern with the moral relativism that can seem implied by pluralism. I start, in the rest of this section, by more carefully laying out the dangers of relativist pluralism before turning in §§3–4 to Montessori's account of how to overcome them.

Montessori's first concern with pluralism is practical and moral-political. Because moral sensibilities are so deeply rooted and important, cultural variability can set up intractable divisions between human beings.

> The adaptation of man is not made by one fixed instinct, but by many guiding instincts. Each group varies in regard to the development of these instincts. […] These adaptations detach and separate them from each other […] If, by some chance, people go abroad and must adapt to the behaviour of another group, they either do so with difficulty or fail. They cannot […] renounce their own habits, religion, or language. […] The creative adaptation, once fixed, does not allow for understanding of the other groups of man, who, being adapted to something quite different, have another sentiment. […] To us it may seem horrid to think that the body of a beloved will be taken to pieces by a bird of prey, but it is a sacred and beautiful idea to some people. (London 17: 96–97)

Montessori was acutely aware of processes of globalization that were making the world one in which all human beings are like a 'single organism' (EP 10: 22). But she also noted that this 'unity' exists alongside 'enormous gaps in the realm of man's psyche, errors that set man against man' (EP 10: 60). Rather than the peaceful harmony that should come with unity, people's radically different moral perceptions of the same situations — from 'horrid' to 'sacred and beautiful' — give rise to war and conflict instead of solidarity and mutual interest. And in a world where humans have the technological means for total destruction, the gap whereby pluralism gives rise to war can have devastating consequences (see EP 10: 39–40). Pluralism, in the absence of some way of promoting genuinely universal values, threatens to undo us.

This problem is *practical* and political, but there is also a more narrowly philosophical problem that arises from the conjunction of pluralism with a sense-based moral epistemology. If people 'sense' good and bad in different and incommensurable ways — seeing the same act as 'horrid' or 'sacred' — then it seems impossible to talk about the good or the right at all: 'We ask ourselves if absolute good exists. And we are almost decided against it, because we see that in society the idea of good changes […] And […] many times we rely on society's judgment on moral issues. If society says something is moral, then [we think that] certainly it must be […] If the good of society is not the absolute good, it is not stable' (Rome 18: 271). This philosophical problem not only exacerbates the practical-political one, but it is a central problem for moral theory itself. If there is no universal standard of 'good' and 'right', then any attempt to articulate a substantive moral theory will be at best only the local description of a particular point of view, what Friedrich Nietzsche called a 'prejudice baptized as truth' (Nietzsche 1966: 13). For a moral sense theory, moral pluralism (the incommensurable diversity of moral feelings) seems to imply moral relativism (the incommensurable diversity of genuine goods) or even moral nihilism (the absence of any 'absolute good').

Montessori's response to these philosophical worries is that, despite all the apparent diversity and sociocultural relativity of ethics, there is a universal normative core: 'There is a greater good and absolute, as the truth which has assured life. Life is one, and its laws are established and humankind tends with mysterious and supreme aspirations to obey them' (Rome 18: 271). This universal core is evident even in those areas where human beings seem most divergent. Thus, leaving dead bodies to be eaten by birds of prey, which some find 'horrid' and others 'sacred', is an expression of a 'fundamental moral instinct common to all', a *universal* human recognition that it is important to 'do something special' for those who have died (Rome 18: 97). 'Observing the […] expression [of these universal moral instincts] in different groups, one can see how deeply the adaptation of one of these sentiments goes' (Rome 18: 97), but one can also see *shared* moral values. In this potential variability, though, the moral sense is quite like other senses. We can cultivate hearing to the point that human beings are capable of literally hearing different things based on languages exposed to when young (cf. Bornstein 1989; Deutsch et. al. 2004), and we can also have different moral values. But the basic capabilities that develop in culturally specific ways are constrained by the biology of the ear and the sounds available to be heard in the world. Similarly, we form different moral sensitivities and varying moral principles based on cultural upbringing, but only in the context of biological and world-imposed constraints on what we can consider good and evil.

Moreover, Montessori's moral sense theory is realist in a way that vindicates universal values over their particular manifestations. Realism is the view that there are real moral truths that exist in the world, independent of how one thinks or feels about them. Many moral sense theorists held the view that moral truths *come to* exist *because* we feel certain ways about moral situations. That would be like saying that colour tablets are yellow because they look yellow to us. For Montessori, however, senses might be selective based on our interests, but they are fundamentally ways in which we detect and adapt ourselves to a reality that exists whether we sense it or not. So, too, with the moral sense. This opens the possibility for culturally specific moral values to run into barriers of moral reality, a possibility particularly evident in cases of social change:

> All social revolutions come from people's aspirations to draw as close as possible to this absolute good. Just as children rebel when we do not want them to follow the road of their own salvation and judge them as naughty, so people at certain times rebel against a social condition because they have felt a higher plan and wish to make a further step towards the good. Such people must have a sensitivity to feel *absolute* good and evil and not only that transitory perception of good and evil in society. (Rome 18: 271)

The central moral-epistemological[7] claim of this passage is that humans' moral sensitivity, while it can be co-opted, refined and/or corrupted by the societies in which people find themselves, is prior to those cultural modifications in something like the way that the basic structure of our outer senses is prior to the culturally specific ways that our attention gets directed. Just as the view that one gets epistemic access to objects' shapes through senses of sight and touch does not preclude (and is in fact conducive to) realism about shape, so too a moral sense theory does not preclude (and can be conducive to) realism about moral values. And just as we can remain 'blind' to what is present to the outer senses but can also — eventually and in the right conditions — come to see clearly, so too we can transcend transitory social concepts of good and evil in the light of innate moral sensibilities.

Given this absolute good at the heart of moral sensibility, the cultural adaptability of moral sense can be an advantage, if we make use of that adaptability properly. At present, we humans find ourselves in genuine moral crises, with moral values that seem to interfere with solving pressing global problems such as world peace and environmental sustainability. Our sensibility to an absolute conception of the good reveals the need to train and cultivate that sensibility in particular ways and to resist cultural tendencies towards short-term fixes, nationalism, or tribalism. Overcoming such tendencies in adults is extremely difficult, but we can use *children's* flexibility in order to cultivate their moral sense towards addressing present problems. Thereby, we can better attain that absolute good that all culturally specific conceptions ought to specify and promote. As Montessori puts it,

> If [the child] is capable of constructing one nature, he will likewise be capable of constructing another. […] The consequence is that if you want to change these deep deposits in man which are against those of another group, you […] must take humanity during the age of growing, when the subconscious is being built […] Place the child so that he can absorb something from the environment which will be a part of him forever […] We must prepare a wider environment for childhood if men are ever to understand each other better. Not just to understand each other at a rational level, but so that they can act together following their deep characteristics. […] We must look to the children as a vehicle for bringing change to humanity […]. (London 17: 99, 101)

The same absorbent mind that produces apparently intractable ethical conflicts amongst adults also provides means for overcoming those conflicts. Through environments that foster appreciation for absolute goods, including respect for diversity amongst particular ways of life, children's moral senses can be cultivated to generate mutual love and support rather than conflict.

Montessori deepens her emphasis on the right kind of moral education by arguing that social relativism becomes a problem primarily through bad moral concepts rather than defects in the moral sense itself:

> [Insofar as it] is possible that good and evil may be distinguished by means of an 'internal sense', *apart from cognitions of morality* […], the good and evil in question would be absolute; that is to say, they would be bound up with life itself and not with acquired social habits. (SA 9: 250–51, emphasis added)

Moral *cognitions* (principles), rather than diversity of moral feelings, provide the primary impetus towards relativistic moral conflicts. Thus the primary role of education is less to shape the moral sense than to *refrain from corrupting* it.

> To keep alive and to perfect psychical sensibility is the essence of moral education. Around it, as in the intellectual education which proceeds from the exercise of the senses, *order* establishes itself: the distinction between right and wrong is perceived. No one can

> *teach* this distinction in all its details to one who cannot see it. (SA 9: 149–50)

Still, the right environment — and particularly avoiding the *wrong* environment — provides an essential means of 'help'.

> [I]n order that 'the child may be helped' it is essential that the environment should be rightly organized, and that good and evil should be duly differentiated. An environment where the two things are confused, where good is confounded with apathy and evil with activity, good with prosperity and evil with misfortune, is not one adapted to assist the establishment of order in the moral consciousness, much less is one where acts of flagrant injustice and persecutions occur. (SA 9: 250)

By means of injustices of the kind typical in educational contexts (e.g. EP 10: 17), children's natural feelings for the good can be corrupted and diverted. When corrupt moral concepts are applied in their environments, children cease to trust their natural moral sense and end up embracing social habits. But the very flexibility of disposition that makes these corruptions possible also provides the opportunity for perfecting the 'psychical sensibility' for good and evil 'till it can recognize and at last enjoy "good" up the very limits of the absolute, and also [...] become sensitive to the very slightest deviations towards evil' (SA 9: 253). Montessori orients moral education towards this preserving and perfecting mission.

3 Metaphysics of Morals

Metaphysics is the philosophical study of the ultimate nature of reality, what the universe is made of and how it works. As I argued in Section 2, Montessori responds to the challenge of moral relativism largely by appealing to a genuinely universal, even if not always evident, moral sense. But she enriches this account with a metaphysics wherein moral virtues can be seen as excellences of human beings as living, teleologically ordered beings. Even her arguments for diagnosing social change in terms of responsiveness to absolute good or protecting children from corrupting moral concepts depend upon being able to distinguish social reforms that are fundamentally parochial and destructive from those that are primarily aspirations towards absolute good. Montessori's moral sense theory is thus complemented by what we might call a metaphysics of moral sense, that is, an account of what it is that one senses when one senses that something is 'good'.

Some previous philosophers have held that moral values exist in some eternal realm of values, or consist of some other sort of 'very strange' metaphysical entities 'utterly different from anything else in the universe' (Mackie 1977: 38). For Montessori, however, moral values are features of humans' form of 'life'. Montessori's moral ideal is an 'ideal of "life"' that makes 'life' its fundamental value (SA 220; cf. SA 266). As she puts it in some of her earliest reflections,

> We may rise [. . .] toward a *positive philosophy of life* [. . .] We are *immoral* when we disobey the laws of life; for the triumphant rule of life throughout the universe is what constitutes our conception of beauty and goodness and truth. (PA 27; cf. PA 473, 475)
> We should consider as *good* that which helps life and as *bad* that which hinders it. In this case we should have an absolute good and evil, namely, the good which causes life and the evil which leads to the road of death, the good which causes a maximum degree of development and the evil which — even in the smallest degree — hinders development. (Rome 18: 263)

As a medical doctor influenced by early evolutionary positivism,[8] Montessori saw 'life' as an active and creative biological force, and in *Scientific Pedagogy* she explains and defends 'theories of evolution' [9] that 'attribute the variability of species to *internal* rather than external causes — namely, to a spontaneous activity, implanted in life itself [...]. The internal factor, namely life, is the primary cause of *progress* and the *perfectionment* of living creatures' (PA 46–47). Later, she draws attention to various 'guiding instincts' conducive to the preservation and increasing perfection of 'the individual and the species', that, she says, are 'bound up the very existence of life', tied to 'life in its great cosmic function', and consist of 'delicate inner sensibilities, *intrinsic to life*, just as pure thought is an entirely intrinsic quality of the mind' (Secret 22: 178). A full explication of the metaphysics underlying Montessori's claims here would take us too far afield, but the notion of life is a central metaphysical category for Montessori, one that she sought to articulate in various different ways over the course of her life.[10] 'Life" is an active force in the universe, teleologically oriented towards increasing complexity and perfection, and manifested in the child's striving for excellence.

This emphasis on life ascribes normative importance to impulses that proceed from one's 'guiding instincts' or 'vital force', the striving for self-perfection implicit in our natures as living beings. This notion of finding moral value in biological teleology is an old one, going back at least to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, written in approximately 340 BC. And while this approach might seem contrary to post-Darwinian conceptions of biology, several recent philosophers have shown how the sort of end-directed conception of life that Montessori uses is plausible even today. The twentieth century Oxford philosopher Philippa

Foot makes the point in a particularly Montessorian way, with a clear sense of medical analogy:

> Evaluations of human will and action share a conceptual structure with evaluations of characteristics and operations of other living things, and can only be understood in these terms. [...] Life will be at the center of my discussion, and the fact that a human action or disposition is good of its kind will be taken to be simply a fact about a given feature of a certain kind of living thing. (Foot 2001: 5; see too M. Thompson 2009 [11])

What it is to be excellent or perfect is tied to one's kind of life. And just as human bodies can be excellent (healthy) or not, so too human actions and dispositions (souls) can be excellent or not.

But here Montessori's emphasis on the moral sense adds an important element to life-based virtue ethical theories. While Montessori and Foot may both be correct to put life at the centre of moral theory, Montessori rightly points out that the fundamental means of access to moral truth is not by scientific study of life but through immediate perceptions of moral goods and ills, whether through feelings of peace or joy or through direct confrontation with facts of social life. The metaphysics of life, even if metaphysically fundamental, is epistemically secondary to concrete perceptions of good and evil in particular cases. Like other senses, of course, the moral sense is reliable only insofar as it is healthy; and as in the cases of other senses, its health in a particular instance can be assessed only on the basis of judgments rooted in other(s'), healthy, uses of moral sense. And the ultimate standard of health is (partly) constitutive of the kinds of living beings that we — human beings — are.[12] Thus a moral sense theory and a life-based metaphysics of morals fit together into an integrated and coherent whole, with the latter providing the metaphysical basis for the epistemic legitimacy of the former.

4 Studying Children

For Montessori, human beings recognize moral truths by means of a moral sense, and these truths are normative facts about human life. But the fundamental way in which moral theorists can better understand moral ideals is through the study of children. Life is teleologically oriented in its unfolding, such that living things, when given freedom in a healthy environment, tend towards their good. But human adults have already absorbed culturally specific influences on both natural tendencies and the natural exercise of moral sense. Moreover, because most human adults were raised in conditions that did *not* grant them freedom in a healthy environment, the 'cultural influences' on their actions and sensibilities are more likely to corrupt than cultivate their natural tendencies (see FM and SA). One who wants to develop a moral theory from reflection on *natural* human moral possibilities should study children, and particularly children left in freedom in an environment conducive to the exercise of freedom and the practice of moral sense. That is, the children must 'reveal to us the phases through which social life must pass in the course of its natural unfolding' (AbsMind 233–34; cf. 1938: 81–82).

Crucially, children reveal their true nature — including their moral sensibility — only in healthy conditions conducive to free activity: 'the conditions of observation are made up of two elements: an environment which is conducive to the most perfect conditions of life, and the freedom which allows that life to develop' (Rome 18: 54; cf. Frierson 2015). Only in such contexts can the real nature of any biological being emerge (see MM 14; SA 9: 96). But in the case of children, their worlds tend to be constructed in ways that both limit their freedom directly — through discipline and coercive control — and deny them the environment they need. Studying the 'good' of children under such conditions, like studying adults with ill-formed characters, is like trying to study what is 'healthy' for one who has (and has had) access only to fast food and sedentary occupation (cf. EP 10: 7–11). In conditions conducive to liberty, however, children reveal their 'normal' nature. In this context, Montessori explains how careful observation of children in conditions conducive to life gave rise to her conception of human (moral) ideals:

> Directly these children found themselves under conditions of real life, with serious implements for their own use, of a size proportionate to theirs, unexpected activities seemed to awaken within them. These were as unmistakable as they were surprising and it was our effort to follow them and interpret their meaning, helping others like them to appear also, that brought this method of education into being. No educational method, in the accepted sense, had caused these

> happenings. On the contrary, it was they — as they progressively unfolded — that became our guide and taught us how to treat the children. All began with our efforts to give satisfactory conditions of life, wherein the children should find no obstacles to their development, and in leaving them free to choose the various means of activity that we had provided. (AbsMind 1: 153)

According to Montessori, children in this condition reveal a nature that is quite unlike both 'so-called bad qualities' and so-called 'good and superior' ones (AbsMind 1: 181), a 'new child' with a quite different nature from what one might have expected. Montessori describes these children with the important concept of 'normalization', which describes 'a psychological recovery, a return to *normal conditions*' (Secret 22: 133–44) whereby 'a unique type of child appears, a "new child"; but really [...] the child's true "personality" allowed to construct itself normally' (AbsMind 1: 183):

> Observing the features that disappear with normalization, we find to our surprise that these embrace nearly the whole of what are considered characteristics of childhood [...] Even the features that have been scientifically studied as proper to childhood, such as imitation, curiosity, inconstancy, instability of attention, disappear. And this means that the nature of the child, as hitherto known, is a mere semblance masking an original and normal nature. (Secret 22: 135)

Montessori bases her whole philosophy on these 'revelations' (SA 9: 53) from children, but in the moral realm in particular, they lead her to 'consider morality as a fact of life, which can be studied in the developing child' (1938: 83). This morality, as it unfolds, involves an emphasis on individual work, mutual respect, and solidarity. All of these at first appear as 'extraordinary manifestation[s]' in children (SA 9: 51) but eventually become the basis of an implicitly recognized moral 'technique which allows [them] to live together harmoniously' (1938: 82).[13] Moreover, these basic moral values of normalized children show up in every cultural context in which children are given freedom in a healthy environment, 'not only in almost every nation that shares our Western heritage, but also among many other widely divergent ethnic groups: American Indians, Africans, Siamese, Javanese, [and] Laplanders' (EP 10: 15).

The role of children's uncorrupted moral sense in Montessori's moral epistemology has important implications for moral education in Montessori classrooms. There can be a temptation, even amongst Montessori teachers, to impose one's adult values on the lives of young children, showing them the right and wrong ways to manage conflict, and so on. Lessons in grace and courtesy, for example, can become attempts at communicating one's own moral insights to children. But Montessori's central insight is that adults should 'follow the child' even in the realm of moral formation. The case here is similar to the case of Montessori's materials for teaching reading, writing, math, and other academic subjects. Montessori did not develop materials for teaching those things and then find a way to get children interested in them. Rather, she looked for the sorts of materials that children found interesting, and filled her classrooms with those. Similarly, the goal of moral education in a Montessori classroom is not to find a way to get children to share our adult values, our adult ways of solving social problems. Rather, the goal is to create an environment within which children must live and work together, and then observe how *they* solve problems, what *they* find to be good and right and just. Teachers can then help crystallize these lessons for them through giving the relevant language or highlighting and isolating particular moral insights. But the focus should be on creating normalized children and learning from them.

Of course, creating the conditions for children's 'normal' state to emerge and then observing moral development that occurs in that context depends upon recognizing some standard of normalcy. Montessori begins with a particular conception of what a normal or healthy psyche would be, but she modified and developed her moral theory in the context of actual observations of and work with children. The core of her moral philosophy — character as self-directed work towards perfection — emerged from her observations of children at work, not from prior conviction that such personal striving for excellence is a fundamental moral ideal. And her conception of moral virtue as holistic and internal, as opposed to 'dutiful' (in Kant's sense) or derived fundamentally from external sources (e.g. God, society), was based on her observations of children's agency rather than cultural norms of her Italian Catholic background (but cf. Babini and Lama 2000). Even while constructing environments with some prior conceptions of what counts as good, children revealed moral ideals she would not have constructed for herself.

For Montessori, moral theory does not emerge a priori from abstract reflection; rather, it comes from observation of living and developing human beings and sensitivity to what is good and what is ill in their forms of life. And children provide a particularly fertile field for such observation. A morally attuned teacher engaged in constructing a life together with children will find her prejudices about good and evil constantly challenged by her moral perceptions of the good and ill in children's exercises of agency. The teacher who once assumed that children's self-directed activity is a bad lack of discipline will see, in their concentrated attention to work, an excellence of human agency that requires rather than precludes movement. An attuned

teacher who assumed that children are distracted and flighty will recognize, perhaps for the first time, the evil involved in interrupting children's persistent work for the sake of new activities. And so on. All of these observations depend upon a certain kind of environment/classroom and a teacher-philosopher with a sensitive and attuned moral sense that sees not only what is but what nature is teleologically oriented towards.

5 Conclusion

I want to close by reiterating and highlighting three basic insights for educational practice that emerge from Montessori's moral epistemology. First, I find it inspiring to recognize that classroom situations that call for moral discernment are sensorial materials. Lessons in grace and courtesy are not merely lessons in what to do or how to act, but are also opportunities to help children exercise their capacities to see morally relevant features of the situations they encounter regularly in Montessori environments, , situations of scarcity or personality clashes or possible cooperation or empathy. Recognizing social and moral formation as a kind of sensorial education can also help parents (and educators) who appreciate the carefully developed colour tablets or smelling boxes come to also appreciate the moments of conflict or moral inspiration as akin to these more obvious ways in which children exercise capacities for fine grained *sensory discrimination*.

Second, as noted in Section 4, Montessori's approach to moral philosophy is a helpful reminder that the task of Montessori guides is to 'follow the child', and that includes following children in their own moral insights. As adults, we can easily become rigid and stale in our sense of right and wrong, often adopting moral standards based on how to preserve order in a world of non-normalized adults. By contrast, Montessori discovered radically new ethical ideals, new forms of justice, compassion, and shared life together, through carefully observing how normalized children solve their own social problems. As educators, even as we continue to give the grace and courtesy lessons we have developed through wise and attentive observation of children in the past, we should let ourselves be open to new moral discoveries that will emerge in the children in our classrooms.

Finally, this emphasis on following — and learning from — the child is an important reminder that Montessori educators are to be teachers *and* scientists, and — I would add in a Montessori spirit — also moral philosophers. Adults generally do not understand children, and we do not understand what children understand about the world, and children understand *a lot*. Montessori educators can and must take on the task of observing children with the scientists' eye of refining conceptions of human nature through careful attention to what capacities emerge in children given freedom in an environment conducive to their development. And such educators can and must also observe children with a philosopher's eye, seeking to learn, from children given freedom in a social environment, what human societies are capable of and what moral virtues and norms allow them most to flourish. It is from such educators that the world can be transformed by the insights of children, from such that we can, as Montessori put it in *Education and Peace*, 'recognize the way to salvation, the path that could lead us to true peace' (EP 10: 5).

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Notes

1 For texts by Maria Montessori, wherever possible, I use the latest (as of 2018) Montessori-Pierson Publishing editions of the works of Maria Montessori (2007–), giving volume and page number for each citation. The exceptions to this practice are for works that have not yet been printed by Montessori-Pierson: the original version of The Montessori Method, Pedagogical Anthropology, The Child and the Church, and the 1938 Edinburgh Congress. Abbreviations are as follows:

1938	"Moral and Social Education," from the 1938 Edinburgh Montessori Congress Lectures, reprinted in *The NAMTA Journal* 37.2 (2012): 81–88.
AbsMind	*The Absorbent Mind*.
Adol	*From Childhood to Adolescence*.
CC	*The Child in the Church*. Edited by E. M. Standing, originally published by the Catechetical Guild Educational Society in 1965, republished by Chantilly, VA: The Madonna and Child Atrium, 2000.
CSW	*Child, Society and the World: Unpublished Speeches and Writings*. Oxford: Clio Press, 1989.
DC	*The Discovery of the Child*.
EP	*Education and Peace*.
FM	*The Formation of Man*.
London	*The 1946 London Lectures*.
MM	*The Montessori Method*. Translated by A. George. New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1912.
PA	*Pedagogical Anthropology*. New York: Frederick Stokes, 1913 (reprinted in 2012 by Forgotten Books).
Rome	*The 1913 Rome Lectures: First International Training Course*.
SA	*Spontaneous Activity in Education* (reprinted as The Advanced Montessori Method I).
Secret	*The Secret of Childhood*.

2 Montessori uses the Italian *uomo* (human being) here. Nonetheless, I generally follow the approved translations of the Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company endorsed by the Association Montessori Internationale that Montessori established, unless there are significant reasons to highlight a variation with Italian editions.

3 A discussion of the substantive details of her moral theory — particularly her three-fold emphasis on character (normalization), mutual respect, and social solidarity — will be forthcoming in a future paper.

4 This approach, which allows for moral agency in very young children, differs from that of many contemporary moral philosophers, who connect agency and moral self-governance by appealing to the structure of reflection, deliberation, or rational self-legislation (cf. e.g. Korsgaard 1996, 2009; Reath 2006).

5 Even in the ideal (contemporary Kantian) case of recognizing, on reflection in the light of reason, that one's basic impulses are inconsistent with universal standards of rightness, the endorsement of those standards — by one who does not 'see' their truth at the level of direct, felt experience of the world — will always feel coercive. Kantian duty is in these cases a coercive force, and because Montessori insists that we identify not merely with our reflective reason but with a broader conception of our agency, this force compromises our freedom.

6 As this passage indicates, Montessori is at least a moderate internalist about the moral sense (but not about abstract cognition of moral principles). Insofar as one senses the good by means of feelings of peace and joy, one is motivated to pursue or preserve it.

7 She is also making metaphysical, political-historical, and pedagogical points in this passage.

8 See Foschi 2012; Cimino and Foschi 2012; Frierson 2018.

9 The theorists to whom she appeals for these accounts of evolution are Carl Wilhelm von Nägeli and Hugo Marie de Vries, both important figures in the development of genetics and the eventual Darwinian synthesis, as well