

Maria Montessori's Moral Epistemology: DRAFT

Abstract

This essay shows how Montessori is a moral philosopher worth taking seriously through providing an overview of her moral epistemology. I show how she develops a moral sense theory that incorporates her insight that all 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, showing how her response to this concern implicates a metaphysically-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).

Keywords

Montessori; Moral Epistemology; Moral Sense Theory; Moral Relativism; Moral Education.

Maria Montessori's Moral Epistemology

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 enroll in a PhD program in philosophy at the University of Rome, in order, as she put it, to "undertake the study of ... the principles on which [pedagogy] was based" (MM 33).¹ There she studied under philosophers

¹ For texts by Maria Montessori, I use the following abbreviations (and editions) throughout this article.

1913 *The 1913 Rome Lectures: First International Training Course*. Amsterdam: Montessori-Pierson Publishing, 2013.

1938 "Moral and Social Education," from the 1938 Edinburgh Montessori Congress Lectures, reprinted in *The NAMTA Journal* 37.2 (2012): 81-88.

1946 *The 1946 London Lectures*. Amsterdam: Montessori-Pierson Publishing, 2012.

AbsMind *The Absorbent Mind*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1995 (originally 1949).

CC *The Child in the Church*, ed. E.M. Standing, originally published by the Catechetical Guild Educational Society in 1965, republished by Chantilly, VA: The Madonna and Child Atrium.

DC *The Discovery of the Child*. Trans. J. Costelloe. New York: Random House, 1967.

EP *Education and Peace*. Oxford: Clio Press, 1992 (originally 1949).

FM *The Formation of Man*. Trans. A.M. Joosten, Chennai: Kalakshetra Press, 1955.

MM *The Montessori Method*. Trans. A. George, New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1912.

PA *Pedagogical Anthropology*. New York: Frederick Stokes, 1913 (reprinted in 2012 by Forgotten Books).

such as Giacomo Barzellotti (for history of philosophy); Pietro Ragnisco (moral philosophy); and one of the most important Italian philosophers of the early 20th century, Antonio Labriola; not to mention philosophically inclined psychologists and anthropologists. 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. Despite this philosophical background, 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).

The present essay aims to show that Montessori is a moral philosopher worth taking seriously through providing an overview of her moral epistemology.² This moral epistemology permeates her philosophy of (moral) education, so the present paper often draws from pedagogical contexts to elaborate the underlying epistemology. I show how she develops a moral sense theory that incorporates her insight that all 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, showing how her response to this concern

SA *Spontaneous Activity in Education* (reprinted as *The Advanced Montessori Method I*). Oxford: Clio Press, 1991 (originally 1918).

Secret *The Secret of Childhood*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1996 (originally 1936).

² Montessori's substantive ethical views are the topic of another paper.

implicates a metaphysically-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).

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). Knowledge depends upon experiencing aspects of the world that particularly interest one, and both interest and sensory acuity can be cultivated. Consistent with her empiricism, 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.

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.

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.

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 ... (1913:260-61; see Adol. 5-6; 1946:204)

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. Consistent with the British empiricist moral sense tradition (particularly Hutcheson and Hume), she sees the perception of the "good" as a kind of pleasure. Unlike those theorists, she identifies the distinctive feel of moral appraisal as essentially "joy, ... peace and tranquility" rather than bare pleasure, and (unlike Hume and Smith) she does not reduce the mechanism for production of this pleasure to "sympathy." Rather, it can be a direct appraisal of a situation in terms of its moral qualities. Moreover, Montessori's broader epistemology is unlike more traditional empiricists in seeing all senses as active rather than

purely passive in that they depend 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 under review-a) – 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, all senses are open to *cultivation*, particularly during special *sensitive periods*, and to degradation or loss, if not properly cultivated. Just as empiricists like Hume err in seeing the senses as basically fixed instruments for receiving impressions of the world, so too they err in seeing 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 principle task” (1913:263; cf. Adol 13).

Thus she 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” (1913:262): “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. 87; cf. 1938:83-7; AbsMind 209). Moral education requires “auto-education” (1913:262), 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 colors and words to associate with

those colors – “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. (1913:263)

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 color of the material – and then *he* must recognize these traits himself. What the teacher does is merely to provide 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” (1913:264), 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 89). 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 normalized³ – 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 223-24)

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 colors are everywhere. There we call attention to the red and the white and we say, "This is the red and this is the white" ... [M]oral life should be presented in the same way. (1913:265-6, cf. 1946:236-7)

³ "Normalization" is a technical term referring to the condition of a child left in freedom in an environment conducive to independent activity.

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” (1946:237).

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*. Many moral philosophers – particularly Kantians – emphasize a connection between agency and moral self-governance by appeal to the structure of reflection, deliberation, or rational self-legislation (cf. e.g. Korsgaard 1996, 2009; Reath 2006). But for Montessori, one reconciles freedom with morality when – and only when – one acts in the light of moral ideals that one *sees* for oneself. And 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 32)

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 (and in the case of civil laws or divine commands) or appeals to honor and vanity (as with social pressures and the allocation of esteem) or even by means of compromises made for the sake of self-interest (anticipating reciprocation or operating within various implicit or explicit social contracts). But even in the ideal 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 (see Frierson under review-b), this force compromises our freedom. 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” (AbsMind 210), 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 212).⁴ 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. Hume confronted this problem, and Adam Smith devotes a whole section of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to addressing it (see TMS V). 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 ... [M]orals

⁴ 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.

are a superstructure of social life, which fixes them in determinate form” (AbsMind 188). 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 worth 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 63-5)

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 113), 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” (1936:81; 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 it.

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 behavior 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. (1946:96-7)

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 25, 62-3). 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 64). 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 rather than solidarity and mutual interest (EP 62). 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 44). Pluralism, in the absence of some way of promoting genuinely universal values, threatens to undo us.

This problem is *practical*, but there is also a more properly *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 ... [I]f the good of society is not the absolute good, it is not stable. (1913:271)

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, 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” (1913:271). 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 (1913:97). “[O]bserving the ... expression [of these universal moral instincts] in different groups, one can see how deeply the adaptation of one of these sentiments goes” (1913:97), 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.⁵ The capacity for culturally-specific moral values to run into barriers of moral reality is 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. (1913: 271)

The central moral-epistemological⁶ claim of this passage is that humans' moral sensitivity, while it can be coopted, 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. Thus 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, 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

⁵ In this respect (but cf. §3), Montessori's is more like Reid's moral sense theory than Hume's (see Reid 2010; Roeser 2010; Cuneo 2011).

⁶ She is also making metaphysical, political-historical, and pedagogical points in this passage.

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 towards 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 the 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 (1946:99, 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 through arguing that social relativism becomes a problem primarily through bad moral concepts rather than defects in the moral sense itself:

[Insofar as i]t 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 259)

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 258)

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 258)

By means of injustices of the kind typical in educational contexts, children’s natural feelings for the good can be corrupted and diverted. Insofar as 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 least enjoy ‘good’ up to the very limits of the absolute and also ... become sensitive to the very slightest deviations towards evil (SA 262). Montessori orients moral education towards this preserving and perfecting mission.

3. Metaphysics of Morals

As I argued in §2, Montessori responds to the challenge of moral relativism largely by appeal 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.”

For Montessori, values are not “queer” metaphysical entities (cf. Mackie 1977) or platonic forms, but grounded in humans’ form of “life.” “Life” is the fundamental locus of value; Montessori’s moral ideal is an “ideal of ‘life’” (SA 220; cf. SA 266). As she puts it in some of her earliest reflections,

we may rise . . . toward a *positive philosophy of life* . . . [W]e 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)

[W]e 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.

(1913:263)

As a medical doctor influenced by early evolutionary positivism,⁷ Montessori saw “life” as an active and creative biological force, and in *Scientific Pedagogy* she explains and defends “theories of evolution”⁸ 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 46-7). Later, she draws attention to various “guiding instincts” conducive to the preservation and increasing perfection of “the individual and the species” (Secret 212) that, she says, are “bound up the very existence of life” tied to “life in its great cosmic function,” and consists of “delicate inner sensibilities, *intrinsic to life*, just as pure thought is an entirely intrinsic quality of the mind” (Secret 212). 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.

⁷ See Foschi 2012; Cimino and Foschi 2012.

⁸ 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 as Léon Laloy (a Belgian biologist), whose *Evolution de la vie* (Laloy 1902), she cites as particularly helpful for understanding the fundamental principles of biology to which she adheres (see PA 40).

“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 the *ergon* argument in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. And while this approach might seem contrary to mechanistic, post-Darwinian conceptions of biology, we can understand Montessori’s philosophy of life in terms of the thickly value-laden concept of life articulated by Michael Thompson (2009), the implications of which have been developed by Philippa Foot in a particularly Montessorian way, with a clear sense of medical analogy:

[E]valuations 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)⁹

⁹ For a more metaphysically loaded conception of life and its normative importance, see Evan Thompson 2007. On Evan Thompson’s account, “life” is not an irreducible category with normative implications but an isolation of certain kinds of systems in the world – those with what he calls an “autopoietic” structure – where autopoiesis itself involves “the two-fold purposes of identity (self-production) and sense-making (adaptivity and cognition)” (E. Thompson 2007:153). For Evan Thompson, as for Michael Thompson and Philippa Foot, “vital structures have to be comprehended in relation to norms” (Thompson 2007:74) according to which they seek to conform to “optimal conditions of activity” (Thompson 2007:147, quoting Merleau-Ponty 1962:148).

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. Like other senses, 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.¹⁰

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 to 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-

¹⁰ The naturalist and relatively metaphysically-thin reading of teleology in this section might seem to be at odds with other of Montessori's writings that suggest a more theologically-loaded metaphysics of morals. While her moral sense theory is *compatible* with theological accounts of moral values, it does not require any such account. Even where she appeals to the importance of religion for moral life (e.g. CC 14-15) or promotes what might seem to be a divine command theory of morals (CC 14; CSW 97-9; EP 30-31), the function of her invocation of God is to shift attention from one's own sense of what is right for the child to *what children themselves reveal*. Thus "To discover the laws of the child's development would be the same thing as to discover the Spirit and Wisdom of God operating in the child" (CC 14). The point is not that one should look to any specifically religious source for ethics. Rather, the appeal to "God" should orient us towards children themselves. Montessori likely did ascribe a theological origin and focus to the moral sense, but such a focus is not essential her moral epistemology or pedagogy as such.

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 233-4; cf. 1938:81-2).

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” (1913:54). Only in such contexts can the real nature of *any* biological being emerge (see MM 14; SA 98-9). 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. 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 172, cf. 193)

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 201-2), 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 157) whereby “a unique type of child appears, a ‘new child’; but really ... the child’s true “personality” allowed to construct itself normally” (Abs. Mind 203):

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 157, 159)

Montessori bases her whole philosophy on these “revelations” (SA 54) 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 which at first appear as “extraordinary manifestations” in children (SA 53) but which eventually become the basis of an implicitly recognized moral “technique which allows [them] to live together harmoniously” (1938:82).¹¹

There is a *prima facie* legitimate complaint that Montessori’s emphasis on the child involves a kind of circularity. She creates the conditions for children’s “normal” state to emerge and then notes the moral development that occurs in that context, but this whole method depends upon recognizing some standard of normalcy. One might reasonably object that different moral prejudices will lead teachers to create different environments and thereby elicit different “natural” moral responses in children. But in the context of her metaphysics of morals, this value-loaded empirical methodology is just what one would expect, and neither trivial nor viciously circular (cf. Thompson 2009). She begins with a particular conception of what a normal or healthy psyche would be, but modifies and develops this in the context of actual observations of and work with children. The model for this sort of empirically-informed value theory can be found in Montessori’s early and persisting interest in medicine. Doctors and medical researchers begin their work with a conception of what constitutes a “healthy” human being. Much of what doctors do is promote pre-existing conceptions of health, and medical researchers seek better methods and materials for promoting good health. But in the course of this work, concepts of health can change. Observing how changes associated with youth or aging contribute to the emergence of new forms of life that are recognizably “healthy,” even if not in accordance with norms of health developed for “prime”-of-life adults, can justify changing concepts of what counts as “health” for older (or younger) human beings. And Montessori did change her concepts of moral excellence through observing children. The core of her moral

¹¹ The details of this substantive account of morals are beyond the scope of this essay.

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.

Finally, even her metaphysics of life and observations of the child depend, epistemically, on a moral sense that is precisely a *sense*, a capacity to *recognize* what is good or ill. Like all senses, one can only recognize what one comes to see. Thus 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 excellent 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.

Maria Montessori did not write a *Theory of Moral Sense* or an *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, but in the course of her lectures and writings, she articulated a consistent and rich moral sense theory. To an even greater extent than Hutcheson, Hume, or Smith, she saw the moral sense as subject to development and variability based on early experiences of moral life. Unlike those theorists, she explicitly articulated her moral sense theory in the context of a metaphysics of “life,” which (as virtue theorists such as Foot and Thompson have realized) provides a broader basis for perceptions for good and evil than the “sympathy” of Hume and Smith, a less “queer” metaphysics of morals than the realism of Reid, and a plausible way of addressing (both philosophically and practically-pedagogically) the fact of moral pluralism. And her conception of the moral sense rightly highlights the way in which genuine autonomy must be grounded not merely or primarily in reason but also fundamentally in having one’s own *perceptions* of moral situations. Most importantly, her emphasis on the lived realities of children in conditions of freedom attuned her to not only to the range of ways that children perceive moral truth (i.e., through sympathy but also through immediate awareness of social realities such as scarcity, or through an irreducible sense of peace or joy) but also to an important and sophisticated substantive set of moral ideals (discussion of which will have to wait for a future paper). Particularly in an era when philosophers are attuned to the need to learn from the insights of empirical psychology (see, e.g., Appiah 2008, Doris 2002, Miller 2013), Montessori’s sophisticated moral sense theory is worthy of increased attention.¹²

¹² Some of the details of her psychology are likely outdated (though see Lillard 2007), but her general approach, which makes space for the normative relevance of careful observation of children, allows for

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sophisticated incorporation into ethics of insights from empirical (particularly developmental) psychology. (For discussion of Montessori's approach to empirical psychology, see Frierson forthcoming.)

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