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Attending like a dog: On learning ethical attention from other animals

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Abstract

Can we learn how to be better at attending from other animals? The paper argues that we can. While the call for attention to animals is increasingly heard, still few engage with attention by animals, and even fewer with animal attention, both individual and mutual, as an ethical lesson. Working with a concept of attention as inherently ethical, the paper considers four elements of attention which non-human animals can teach humans: unbiased objectivity, creativity, empathetic engagement, and shared/mutual attention. These elements will emerge through four case-studies, each illustrating an aspect of attention which a human can learn from a non-human animal. The first, taken from Iris Murdoch, reports Rainer Maria Rilke's observations of animal attention as unbiased objectivity. The second, from Emmanuel Levinas, shows a dog attending in a way that is ethically responsive and creative, identifying value where no one else sees it. The third, with the horse known as 'Clever Hans', observes an empathetic mode of attention in which the horse was superior to humans. The fourth and final case-study describes a cat teaching a human how to engage in shared and mutual attention through touch.

Keywords

ethical attention, mutual attention, non-human animals, moral learning, vision and touch, Iris Murdoch

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Introduction

'I study these creatures. // they are my teachers.'

My Cats, Charles Bukowski[1]

As in Bukowski's, cats have figured prominently in my learning from animals. One of my greatest teachers has been my cat Jean, who lived with my family for almost 16 years. I found Jean next to a bin when she was only 2 months old, which made our bond especially deep and natural. I watched Jean as she learned to explore her surroundings safely, and with her I learned how to take care of a cat for the first time, her own specific needs, her curiosity, her boundaries, and how she communicated them. I saw her personality develop and learned to distinguish, for instance, among her playful, tired, restless, loving, or angry little bites. There are a million things I learned from her. Among the most striking ones, and the one I will explore in this paper, is her way of paying attention, how she demanded and encouraged attention, how we attended together, and how all that has improved my own ways of being attentive. This paper, in short, is about how we can learn ways of attending from and with non-human animals.

The concept of attention I will use is one with an inherently ethical character. This gives the argument a normative dimension, specifically this: learning ways of attending from animals makes us better at attending, and if paying attention is a morally desirable activity, then learning attention from animals makes us morally better too. The normative concept of attention I will employ is provided by Iris Murdoch, on whom I will also draw for the first of the examples that drive the discussion, and by Simone Weil, who significantly influenced Murdoch.

My claim will be made through four stories of animal attention. The stories, with the exception of the last one, come from the philosophical and psychological literature. In each, an animal provides an instance of a different aspect of ethical attention. The first, taken from Murdoch herself, reports Rilke's observations of animal attention as *unbiased objectivity*. The second, from Emmanuel Levinas, shows a dog attending in a way that is ethically *responsive and creative*, identifying value where no one else sees it. The third, with the horse known as 'Clever Hans', observes an *empathetic* mode of attention in which the horse was superior to humans. The fourth describes a cat engaging a human in shared and mutual attention through touch, encouraging *receptivity and responsiveness*. The stories are intended as starting points for reflection, rather than examples for arguments. Taken together, they contribute to the overall claim which is this: there are aspects of attention which are inherently ethical; animals are able to exemplify some of them; engaging with animals in such acts of attention – either jointly or as receptive objects of them – can be a form of ethical learning for humans.

The call for a greater focus on our practices of (not) attending to non-human animals has been raised in philosophy at least since the work of Josephine Donovan (1996), Jacques Derrida (2008), and Donna Haraway (2008), but it is recently, and fortunately, gaining more ground. For instance, Elisa Aaltola (2018) proposes loving attention as a more responsible form of animal ethics, Jacob Quick (2022) expands Derrida's account

in connection with Simone Weil's ethics of attention, and Nora Ward (2024) proposes that attention to animals can reduce anthropocentric bias. These contributions remind us of two, rather obvious yet oddly overlooked, facts (one epistemological, the other more straightforwardly ethical): that by attending to animals we will learn about them; and that such learning through attention will foster more complex, responsive, and just relationships with them.

The importance of attention has also been increasingly observed within the field of multispecies studies, for instance with the recent special issue edited by Dooren et al. (2016), in which the authors call for 'arts' of attentiveness which expand the idea and modalities of attention, a methodological freedom which allows different and unexpected encounters and, indeed, ways of learning from animals. Such approach, as they note, is also intrinsically ethical, for 'cultivating new modes of attentiveness' is necessary to the goal of 'liv[ing] well inside relationships that can rarely be settled to everyone's satisfaction and never once and for all' (2016: 16). This open-endedness is also, as we shall see, integral to the concept of attention that I will present as morally desirable.

This paper will borrow the methodological extension of multispecies studies by drawing not only on scientific studies, but also on animal 'anecdotes' drawn both from the philosophical literature and from other authors' lives, including my own. In this way, it partly follows the proposal of 'phenomenology of animal life', presented by Dominique Lestel et al. (2014), on two points: by focusing on individual animals rather than species, and by analysing anecdotes which may, or may not, generalise in the laboratory, but which are essential for discovering 'anomalous, unusual and singular animal capacities whose witness so directly threatens the model of predictable beast-machines' (Lestel et al., 2014: 128). Individuality and anecdote require a form of ongoing interaction and reciprocity that opens up possibilities for attention that are not easily available in standard scientific studies. Accordingly, the animals that provide the four central stories of this paper are: two dogs, one horse, and one cat; animals with whom human relationships are traditionally formed, and therefore also more easily understood through the reader's own experience. The stories I have chosen also involve human–animal interaction, rather than observation of animal attention (to or with members their own or other species), for three reasons. One is that, as Derrida (2008) has made clear, being an object of animal attention will engender affective responses and reflections that are not available through mere observation; second as Ward notes, being an object of animal attention reverses the traditional epistemic and social human–animal hierarchy of observer and observed (2024: 171); third – and this applies to the fourth case, where humans are not just objects of attention, but participate in attention with an animal – because mutual attention involves sharing both the object and some of the modalities of attention with an animal, providing a specific kind of experiential learning.

My claim is that we can learn features of ethical attention from animals. This is more modest than it may appear: learning requires neither that those we learn from are engaged in exactly the same activity, nor that they are consciously teaching us anything. Granted, to be able to learn attention from animals we need sufficient similarity to believe that we are doing something that can be broadly called 'attending', but also enough difference to claim that we are learning something new. I also remain neutral as to whether the animals'

attention is itself morally praiseworthy:[2] it is sufficient for my claim that when we engage in the forms of attention that are inspired or caused by animal attention – in short, learned through engagement with animal attention – that activity of ours will take a form that is morally good.

However, I do not want to pose limits to what the reader may find in these stories. The purpose of working through them is also to claim the freedom to bypass the cultural double-standard that forces us to *start* by justifying through elaborate argument and plenty of (itself not ethically neutral in its framing) empirical evidence what seems obvious to individual experience, while asking us to accept certain assumptions (such as human exceptionalism) as self-evident truths. I read the frustration of having to accommodate this cultural requirement in Bukowski's poem's opening: 'I know, I know / they are different / they have different needs and concerns / but I watch and learn from them'. After the 'but', having paid homage to the need to remind ourselves, obsessively, that animals *are* different, we can perhaps begin to say what we want to say.

Models of attention

Attention is a contested phenomenon. Even in psychology there is no agreement on what attention is, nor a unified model for studying attention (Styles, 2006). Likewise, in philosophy, several models are competing for providing the definition of what attention is. Among recent and influential theories of attention, we find Wayne Wu's (2011) idea of attention as selection for action, and Sebastian Watzl's (2017) view of attention as a way of structuring the mind according to given priorities. On these views, it is not difficult to include animals in attention theories. For example, in line with the selection for action theory, we know that the attentional patterns of bees, when flying, are clearly geared towards their action, which helps us understand, for instance why bumblebees are more easily distracted than honeybees during search behaviour (Morawetz and Spaethe, 2012). Or, fitting with both the action-directedness and the salience theory, it appears that the common fruit fly possesses – like humans do – a top-down mechanism inhibiting the response toward salient stimuli, to accomplish a goal-directed action (Frighetto et al., 2019). If we base our understanding on these theories, we can assign normative significance to attention, but it will be based on extrinsic factors. Watzl's (2022) recent discussion of the ethics of attention, for instance, emphasises discriminating among the objects of attention. While it is easy to agree that different objects of attention will structure consciousness in morally relevant ways, both short- and long-term, there is nothing specifically ethical in attention here. Second, it is compatible with both theories that attention is not necessarily as something that we should *learn*, refine, and aim at, except for its modalities and direction, but as a function of our consciousness and action.

I have no intention to dispute that these views capture important elements of what attention is. But there is something else that emerges when we consider examples of attention, where attention appears to be inherently ethically significant. To understand this idea of attention, we need to turn to Iris Murdoch. For Murdoch, attention is morally significant because of two essential features: it is truthful and truth-seeking, and in virtue of that, it has the ability to counteract the subject's self-regarding tendencies – which, for

Murdoch, emerge through the ways in which we distort reality to suit our needs, assuage our fears, or satisfy our desires (Murdoch, 1998: 299–336). Unbiased objectivity, basic creativity, empathetic engagement, and receptivity are four morally laden elements of attention thus understood. But instead of taking up too much space by elaborating on these ethical features of attention now, I will let them emerge through the case-studies that follow, as we walk through some animal lessons.[3]

Rilke's dog: Attention as negative virtue

Our first animal story comes from Murdoch herself – perhaps surprisingly, since Murdoch does not devote much space to animals in her philosophy. As part of her discussion of 'pure consciousness' in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992), Murdoch quotes Rainer Maria Rilke, who is in turn describing Cezanne's painting method, with these striking words:

> "Like a dog he sat in front of it and simply looked, without any nervousness or irrelevant speculation' … And about a self-portrait of Cezanne, Rilke speaks of 'an animal attentiveness which maintains a continuing, objective vigilance in the unwinking eyes. And how great and incorruptible this objectivity of his gaze was, is confirmed in an almost touching manner by the circumstance that, without analysing or in the remotest degree regarding his expression from a superior standpoint, he made a replica of himself with so much humble objectiveness, with the credulity and extrinsic interest and attention of a dog which sees itself in a mirror and thinks: there is another dog." (Murdoch, 1992: 246)

Here a dog illustrates both elements of ethical attention outlined above: its selfless truthfulness, of 'humble objectiveness'. This enables, for Murdoch, reality to emerge for what it is under the attentive gaze.[4] Note how the qualities illustrated through the dog are negative: the dog looks 'without nervousness or speculation'; 'without analysing'; 'humbly', or without pride.[5] The first general feature of ethical attention that we should learn, then, is negative: its objectivity is possible if something else does not get in the way. This negativity should not be construed as a lack. Rather, following Murdoch, it is the necessary counterpart of the truth-seeking of attention, that is, 'unselfing'. If attention's ethical value, following Murdoch, is its truthful or truth-seeking engagement with reality, what impedes such engagement with the real needs to be removed at the same time. What blocks such engagement, according to Murdoch, is the web of fantasies, hesitations, denial and fear that we spin – individually and socially. The dog's negative qualities, therefore, represent not the absence of some important capacity, but a welcome removal of what, in humans, makes attention so difficult.

Now a second worry arises: even if the negative virtues of the dog are not construed as lack as such, they are also not removed in the dog's attention because dogs attend in this objective way by their very nature; in other words, unlike humans, they cannot do otherwise. On this view, the dog in Rilke's comment looks objectively at a landscape because his mind is not capable of things like 'nervousness of speculation'. The cats in Bukowski's poem sleep 'without hesitation or remorse' because they are incapable of

either. In Murdoch's language, the worry goes, animals can see past their ego because they don't have an ego in the first place.

There are at least three reasons not to take this worry as denying that we can learn attention from animals. First, even if animals had no alternative but to attend that way, we could still, as we saw above, learn that form of attention from them: learning does not require that the model presents the entirety of the process leading to the achievement, but it is enough to show what that kind of attention may look like. The second is that it is not clear that having no alternative means having no moral merit. There are spontaneous, praiseworthy inclinations and actions that we naturally have or perform without choosing or training. Ethical attention does not require that we consciously control or dissolve our projections. Finally, growing consensus in comparative psychology indicates that some non-human animals do have the capacity for self-awareness (DeGrazia, 2009) and conscious metacognition (Smith, 2009) that are required for enabling some of the Murdochian obstacles to attention; ordinary interaction also points towards the possibility that other animals can very well project their fears etc. onto the object of attention, thereby distorting it: we shirk from people thinking they will hurt us if we were hurt in the past, distorting the present reality; so do dogs. A dog's objective vigilance does not in fact seem unavoidable.

Levinas's dog: The creativity of attention

The first case-study was only partially satisfying. While it enabled us to say that we can learn, by watching other animals, how a more 'direct simplicity' of attention can look like, the possibility that some animals may lack the capacity for all of those treacherous, complicated and repetitive distortions of reality that many humans – not all – are capable of, makes the success o2f the example partial. Furthermore, that aspect of attention does not cover all that, according to Murdoch and Weil, ethical attention involves. The negative success of attention is only part of the story. The other part is positive. Attending is not only about overcoming obstacles, it's about having the right sort of positive engagement with what's in front of us – what Murdoch calls love, or *eros*. Attention is a 'just and loving gaze' (1998: 327). This 'energy', as Murdoch calls it, is more than absence of ego. It is the capacity on the one hand, to *seek* what is there, and on the other, to *respond* accordingly.

This kind of attention is not only active, it is also creative (Murdoch, 1992: 506), because it involves being able to recognise something that is not plain to see, something that no one else may recognise at all. Simone Weil claims, more puzzlingly, that what attention recognises is not there: in her retelling of the Good Samaritan, she claims that before the Samaritan sees it, the humanity in the afflicted man is not there. By way of a tentative interpretation: this idea can be plausible if we construe 'humanity' as a thick concept that is dependent on recognition, and which neither the afflicted nor others recognise. Hence, attention can be creative in a strong sense: 'love sees what is invisible' (1951: 106), where 'love of our neighbour is made of creative attention' (1951: 105).[6] Attention enabled the Samaritan to recognise not only the need, but the value, and to react accordingly, by practical help, and in a less tangible way, through care and respect.

This takes us to the second, better known example of animals as teachers of attention from the philosophical literature. It's Levinas's story of Bobby the dog. Yes, another dog.

> There were seventy of us in a forestry commando unit for Jewish prisoners of war in Nazi Germany … the other men … and the children and women who passed by and sometimes raised their eyes – stripped us of our human skin … Racism shuts people away in a class, deprives them of expression and condemns them to being 'signifiers without a signified' and from there to violence and fighting … And then, about halfway through our long captivity, for a few short weeks, before the sentinels chased him away, a wandering dog entered our lives. One day he came to meet this rabble as we returned under guard from work. … We called him Bobby, an exotic name, as one does with a cherished dog. He would appear in the morning and was waiting for us when we returned, jumping up and down with delight. For him, there was no doubt that we were men. (Levinas, 1990: 152–153).

Several scholars have commented on the absence of attention to animals in Levinas' ethics and have raised questions about his exclusion of animals from fully blown ethical engagement (see Atterton and Wright, 2019). I will not be able to delve into this rich discussion here. I only want to note that, in an interview with three students in 1986, Levinas himself offers a clue for his inattention to animals, a clue that is not philosophical but rather practical. When asked if one could consider the face of the animal as other, Levinas says he doesn't know. He re-states that 'the human face is an altogether different thing', and then reveals: 'myself, I don't have much to do with animals' (Levinas in Atterton and Wright, 2019: 3–9). The lack of attention is first of all situational and physical, but with ethical consequences. Without 'having much to do with animals', in physical experience or mental engagement, how can we expect a philosopher to talk meaningfully about them – either about what they are like and their value, or, importantly, about what they are not and what sort of value they do not have?

Regardless of the role animals play in Levinas' own philosophy, the question I want to ask is the following: what do we learn from this story, told in this way? In the first part of the account, Levinas describes himself and his group as marked by what Simone Weil called 'affliction', which takes hold of one's entire life, physical social and psychological, and 'uproots the soul', so that one becomes nothing, and has nothing to love (1951: 117–136). Importantly, Weil states that to attend to the afflicted is impossible, supernatural, and that compassion for the afflicted is a miracle greater than walking on water. To put it in more manageable terms: affliction runs against any deep seated instinct for self-affirmation, and we run away from attending to the afflicted because attention would mean to open ourselves up to affliction too, the worst possible fate in life.

The people around Levinas reacted exactly in this way. As the men in the group were treated like things, thought of themselves as things, so all the others, even the women and children, reacted to them as things. Not the dog. Why? What was it about the dog's attention that was able to overcome the repulsion of affliction? It wasn't just that the dog stood obviously outside of the political and racial lens through which people at the time saw each other; the children, who may have been similarly innocent, were unable to see

the prisoners as humans either. It wasn't just lack of guilt, for other humans, children and adults, may have felt similarly blameless yet failed to attend. The dog's reaction was not only devoid of filters, as we saw above with Murdoch; the dog's reaction was creative, in the way that, as both Murdoch and Weil stress, attention is creative: insofar as it shows us what no one else sees.

The creativity of attention is clearest when we confront affliction, because in that case, not even the afflicted themselves believe in their existence as valuable – or as Weil puts it, as more than things (Weil, 1951: 117–136). To see the afflicted as valuable, one needs to attend in a way that is more than detached, unfiltered objectivity. We need a loving kind of attention, which recognises both the value and the need, and lets the afflicted recognise them in turn. This is the attentional gift that Bobby the dog gave the prisoner, in Levinas's own account.

But attention does not only affect those attended to. If Murdoch and Weil are right that the reality that we perceive through attention is not motivationally inert, then attending involves implicitly assenting to the demand of reality that attention will reveal. Bobby's affectional behaviour is here the manifestation of his perception of value revealed through attention. This also means that attention, understood as receptive engagement, comes with a special sort of vulnerability. This would explain why attending can be so difficult, and attending to affliction almost impossible. Furthermore, if attending involves responding to what will be revealed, then attention, far from being detached observation, inherently involves a form of mutuality, insofar as the object of our attention always affects us in some way – as we shall see more fully below.

Hans the horse: Attention as empathetic engagement

We have now arrived at an understanding of the ethical import of attention as something rich, and affectively and cognitively demanding, through two examples of animal attention. One of the markers of this kind of attention is the vulnerability that comes especially when attention is bestowed on other conscious beings. Among the responses that attention typically opens up when applied to other living beings is empathy. We have increasing evidence that some animals have great capacity for empathy, spanning especially among social species, from primates (De Waal and Preston, 2017) to rats (Bartal et al., 2011)[7]. Various reports, bolstering the story I am about to tell, make it plausible that some animals' empathetic capacities can be superior to humans', and in the cases we will examine empathy is enabled by attention in instructive ways.

Our third case-study is the story of 'Clever Hans'. Hans was a horse who lived between the nineteenth and twentieth century, and was claimed to be able to perform complex mathematical operations, trained by his legal owner Wilhelm von Osten, a mathematics teacher. Having gained popularity, Hans caught the attention of psychologist Carl Stumpf, who decided to study Hans's capacities and concluded, to everyone's disappointment, that Hans could not do maths, but instead possessed an extraordinary capacity to read behaviour and emotion. He read the postures and emotions of the questioner, even when the questioner was unaware and not trying to direct him, and thus arrived at the answer the questioner wanted. After von Osten died, Hans was drafted into the first

World War and was either killed in battle or eaten by soldiers. It is likely that the human community would not have allowed him to suffer this fate had he been able to perform maths. What seems to me astonishing is that everyone was disappointed to discover that Hans 'only' had an exceptional capacity for empathetic attention. They discovered something far more valuable than mathematical skills, but found it commonplace. By contrast, we humans appear – increasingly, with developing technologies, decreasing social contact and, one may say, decreasing capacity for attention – in need of aids to identify and respond to emotions, in our own species and others.[8]

Questions have also been raised about the bias and accuracy of Pfungst's investigation, for instance by Vinciane Despret's (2015) insightful review of the case. Despret has also found that Hans had the capacity not only to read emotions but to influence his questioners to produce gestures he could read as cues for finding the answer. Without the questioner consciously realising, Despret argues, Hans was able to capture the attention of the questioner, and create a mutual attunement. Hans's case, on this reading, reveals a capacity for empathetic attention which is also capable of capturing the attention of the one attended-to.

This case brings out more explicitly the mutuality that started to emerge with Bobby the dog, and that is still rarely discussed in relation to ethical attention. While Bobby's objects of attention were affected by experiencing their value being partly restored, Hans's objects of attention were affected in action, performing gestures they did not realise, which in turn Hans picked up. What we can learn from this story is twofold: first, that attention to another may never be a case of detached observation, which leaves the object unaffected; second, that attention to another rarely leaves us emotionally unaffected, and that is sometimes why we unknowingly avoid it. Lack of empathetic attention seems to be, indeed, part of what led to Hans being failed by the human society around him.

Jean the cat: Shared and mutual attention

Joint attention and human inattention

The stories of Bobby and of Hans have taken us towards a more interactive dimension of attention, where attention involves, in the first case, being affected and responding accordingly, and in the second case, not only being receptive, affected, and responsive, but also responding in such a way that the object of attention – in this case Hans's questioner – is itself affected and participates in the same attentional act, consciously or not. With the fourth and last animal case-study, I want to move towards a more explicit form of mutuality that characterises ethical attention: not only attending together, but mutually shaping and modulating the moment and object of attention. This is what happens, as we shall see, when there is an attentive contact between two beings. I want to suggest that animals can, here too, and perhaps in the clearest way, show us how it's done. Unlike the others, our fourth scenario, with Jean the cat, will come at the end of the discussion rather than at the start.

Attending together, in philosophy and psychology, is studied under the label of 'joint attention', as an element of social attention, understood specifically as the capacity both

to attend to the same object as someone else, and to both be aware that the other is attending to that object (Seemann, 2011). There is, unsurprisingly, a staggering disproportion between what we know about human social attention and that of other species, and studies of social attention in animals are relatively few. When it comes to attention, one of the areas where we find more empirical studies on animal attention is the study of joint attention. The reason, however, is not mere curiosity and desire to learn about animals. It is because joint attention has been taken as the key to articulating the distinction between humans and animals.[9] Joint attention is the threshold animals, no matter how intelligent, cannot pass, at least according to influential conclusions by Michael Tomasello (2022) and others.

These conclusions have been met with increasing resistance by psychologists and philosophers who have questioned the methodological and philosophical assumptions of the studies (see Urban, 2014). For instance, Carpenter and Call (2013) claim that apes do not engage in joint attention because there were observed not to i) produce declarative gestures in order to share attention, ii) point with a look and a smile to the other attender, iii) alternate the gaze between object and partner, and iv) interact only for the purpose of sharing attention and for no other purpose. These behaviours, however, are indicative of joint attention in human infants, and Leavens (2011) and Leavens and Racine (2009) among others wonder why this must be the paradigm to apply to other species and other contexts. Against this exclusion, David Leavens (2011) has pointed out that i) humans need to be trained in pointing too, ii) there is a difference in joint attention in human–animal and animal–animal attention (why should they attend to me as I attend to them?), iii) apes don't point because they typically do not need to, being less helpless than infants, iv) these studies overgeneralize from one population to an entire ape or human species, and v) the studies rely on several arguments from ignorance, where a lack of empirical data is taken to signify evidence of absence and universality.

While I am not here going to defend a theory of joint attention with other animals, phenomenology has highlighted experiences that we do have with other animals, where attention, if not joined, is at least shared. This means that while only one of the parties may be aware of the other's attention, both are attending to the same object and through that, one can learn both about new features of the world revealed by the other's attention and, importantly, that joint attention reveals a world that is shared. This is the import of Antony Fredriksson's (2024) exploration of attention together with his dog. Fredriksson observes how the dog's attention to a squirrel on a tree is 'revelatory' for him of a new way of seeing the same world. While Fredriksson acknowledges that the dog may not be conscious of the fact that they are attending to the same object – therefore calling this process 'shared' rather than 'joint' attention – this phenomenological exploration points to the possibility of learning through attending *with* another animal. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, attention here is, on the one hand, dependent and indicative of a 'common world' between man and dog; and on the other, it is that which opens up the man's world to the salience in the dog's world.

These elements – a common world and the revelatory nature of sharing attention with another animal – are important. But I want to move further towards the other animal by considering a case of shared – but also, I would argue, joint – attention where the shared

object is not something external, but the contact between the two beings, so that the attention is shared and mutual at the same time.

Mutual attention through touch

One of the most striking forms of human inattention when studying both animal attention and animal morality – the two domains where learning attention from animals plays out – is the bias for vision. The very concept of 'social attention' includes selective attention to faces which, as Levinas stressed, are the central and most expressive part of the body – for us. Against this, Maria Botero (2016) has claimed that the almost exclusive focus on vision in joint attention studies may be missing something not only about animals, but about humans too. Botero suggests considering tactile attention instead, and that if we do so, we will find that primates and human infants engage in very similar forms of joint attention.

The vision bias affects research on animals in other areas too, with the vision-centric mirror self-recognition (MSR) test being used as the gold standard to determine self-awareness. But animals can fail the test for various reasons. For instance, as Monsó and Wrage (2021) observe, 'gorillas's failure to pass the test has been linked to the fact that this species tends to avoid eye contact with conspecifics, because it is considered a threat', while dogs 'fail the MSR test but pass an analogous olfactory test'. All this shows, as Siiri Tarrikas writes, how

> Researchers tend to concentrate on only one sense modality, mostly for practical reasons. Usually the easiest choice is usually the visual sense, which is not the dominant sense for all animals … Frogs, for example, do not have saccadic eye movements; therefore, their attentional mechanisms differ from those of mammals … Sometimes attention can be finetuned even outside the body, for example, spiders can use their nets as attentional aids, which they can tune to various vibration frequencies, according to their needs (2024: 5).

Interestingly, Murdoch herself has been accused of being optocentric, because of her stress on 'moral vision'. These accusations are not unfounded. But over the course of this paper, I have singled out features of attention as she conceptualises it – those that make it ethically important – that point us in the opposite direction of the detachment and univocity that sight symbolises and, at times, exemplifies.

With Bobby the dog, Hans the horse, and other animals, we have observed that the ethical features of attention are rather inclusive of a form of *openness* and *vulnerability*, necessary for the truth-seeking of attention, which may demand responses from us that we do not control because they are dictated by that very reality. This form of attention requires some mutuality. And when attention occurs primarily through touch, mutuality occurs inevitably and right from the start. With mutuality, it may be more difficult to claim that an animal is teaching me attention, if we are attending together. Yet, even with touch, one can lead through attention, and the other can follow. One (here, the animal) initiates attention, and little by little, shows the other the way, waiting for the other (here, the human) to adjust, in a shared act.

In the phenomenological tradition inspired by Merleau-Ponty, attention involves precisely a bodily orientation to the other, where the differences are not a hindrance, but rather a precondition for attention to yield its transformative power (Fredriksson, 2024 Reddy, 2011). It was, indeed, the phenomenologists, as Richard Kearny writes in his delightful book *Touch* (2021), that recovered the role of touch in the context of an optocentric Western philosophy going back all the way to Plato. That recovery itself requires a form of attention, 'suspending ingrained prejudices and daring to know what we already know' (2021: 34). Kearney not only recovers, but gives primacy to touch, as 'all living beings possess touch and every sense implies tactility of some kind' (2021: 35). He also highlights of something important for our purposes, namely, the responsiveness and reciprocity of touch:

> When we touch something we respond to what is touched. We are responsive to others in their distinctiveness precisely because we are in touch with them. 'Touch knows differences'… Intelligence begins with the vulnerability of skin…
>
> In touch, we are both touching and touched at the same time; but that does not mean we dissolve into sameness. Difference is preserved, which is why Aristotle declares that 'flesh is a medium (metaxu), not an organ'. (Kearney, 2021: 35–37)

Attention through touch is severely overlooked, yet it can disclose forms of engagement that visual attention typically does not. Given its inherent mutuality, touch can ground instances of shared attention where the object is both the touch and each other. Touch, following Kearny, can foster forms of attentive interaction that are less conceptually and culturally laden than sight, and hence more open in terms of the differences of those who engage in this type of attention together, including multispecies attention.

I think it is in attentive touching that we can learn the most novel and transformative forms of ethical attention from other animals. In those encounters, we can experience something that is both joint and mutual attention, therefore both a teaching and an active learning. Let us return to Jean. During the years I had the good fortune of sharing a space with her, especially when she was older, whenever I passed by the room where she was sitting, she would call me. A meow, and maybe a nod of the head, indicating through a clear instance of joint attention where she wanted me to be. So, when I was smart enough to understand, I would go and sit with her. She would rub her head on my leg, or roll over, showing her belly, and I would reach with my hand and start caressing her soft fur. She would respond with a purr, whose vibrations are both auditory and tactile. Her attention was, as one may say in technical language, 'sustained attention', which helped my own attention return to the presence of 'us' whenever my mind wandered. My touch and her touch, together, created an interesting third possibility for joint attention: we were both attending to something together, and attending to each other at the same time, for that something was *created* by both of us and our attention. Yet hers remained superior. If my attention wavered, she noticed, and gently brought it back. Her attention directed me to our shared presence as value, for attention is itself a way of valuing. Even now, after many months have passed, I know, less perfectly than she did, that hers was a

much wiser allocation of attention, steadier, more open, and more receptive, showing up the value of that moment together in a way that I would not have been able to fathom without her guidance.

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Notes

1. Full text available from: https://allpoetry.com/poem/14326886-My-Cats-by-Charles-Bukowski
2. On the discussion around animal morality in general, see e.g. Rowlands (2012).
3. I expand on Weil's and Murdoch's concept of attention and its ethical nature in Caprioglio Panizza, 2022 – see chapter 1 for an overview.
4. In this description, we find another element of ethical attention, which is indeed part of the meaning of 'attending': patience, or waiting. Murdoch connects it with creativity, as we shall see in the next section: 'the attentive waiting for the response of the unconscious power is not remote from moral imagination, it is like, or is, prayer. Here we can experience the force and movement of imagination in conscious waiting and periods of attention' (1992, p. 323). This was also one of Bukowski's artistic creative rules. On his tombstone, he asked to have carved the words 'Don't try'. This enigmatic injunction is explained in a 1963 letter to John William Corrington: '"What do you do? How do you write, create?" You don't, I told them. You don't try. That's very important: not to try, either for Cadillacs, creation or immortality. You wait, and if nothing happens, you wait some more. It's like a bug high on the wall. You wait for it to come to you' (2004, p. 110). Simone Weil stressed exactly this sort of waiting in her essay on school studies (1951, pp. 105–116).
5. The same negative structure of praise, incidentally, is what we find in Bukowski's poem: cats, he writes, 'never worry', and sleep 'without hesitation or remorse'.

6. Love is identified with attention, for in Weil's view, love means refraining from imposing our will and making space for the other, in an act of self-withdrawal that is akin to God's creation See Vetö, 1994: ch. 1 for an explanation of Weil's idea of creation and decreation.
7. Note that this was studied in a distressing experiment that placed rats in small cages to observe whether another rat would empathise and rescue them. To the rats', rather than to the experimenters', credit, they did.
8. Take, for instance, the acclaimed experiment that is supposed to lead to advancement in pig 'farming' by allowing humans to detect emotions in pigs, not by familiarity and attention, but rather through a light ring that projects 2D and 3D images, and an algorithm that charts facial expressions (UWE Bristol, 2019).
9. Which is, as Derrida (2008) has noted, one of humanity's favourite activities.

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