**Confronting Neoliberal Precarity: The Hyperdialectic of Care**

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[*I will be drawing upon this paper but not reading it*]

On December 8, 2011, Chicago resident Carlos Centeno Sr. died of injuries suffered three weeks earlier from a workplace hot acid spill that burned much of his body. Following the spill, Centeno was not cared for expediently or properly and suffered greatly (Morris and Mitchell). A Mexican native and father of three, Centeno came to the United States in 1994, followed a few years later by his partner, Vella Carbot. He held short-term jobs bartending, driving forklifts, and delivering newspapers. After being laid off in 2010, Centeno joined an agency that specializes in temporary work assignments. He was subsequently assigned to a home products manufacturer of household goods including shampoos, styling gels, deodorant sticks, dishwashing liquids and household cleaners. His starting pay was $8.25US per hour. Prior to his death, Centeno and other workers experienced a number of personal injuries that appear to be the result of safety protocol failures. “I wanted him to quit,” indicates Carbot, “but, at the same time, we knew he hadn’t found another job yet, and expenses continued, unfortunately, and he had to work” (Morris and Mitchell). Like many others working low-paying and dangerous jobs, Centeno was a victim of circumstances created by neoliberal precarity, and doubly so as both an immigrant and a contingent laborer.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This paper challenges neoliberalism and questions society’s relationship to Carlos Centeno. Why should I care about Centeno? He is not a member of my family or among my friends. He is just another human being among the billions of others that live on this earth. One of the goals for most care theorists is to expand the circle of care beyond familiar friends and family. This goal is often opposed by neoliberal ideology.

Neoliberalism represents a powerful narrative regarding human individualism. It describes a set of political practices as well as an atomized philosophy and disposition that has been widely internalized in the United Stated and the modern developed world. One outcome of neoliberal thinking is to circumscribe the extent and depth of contemporary moral relationships with others. When American television host Jimmy Kimmel offered a tearful description of his newborn child’s need for heart surgery and expressed his concern that many people in the United States would not be able to afford such medical care, former Illinois congressman Joe Walsh, tweeted, “I am sorry about your baby but your story does not obligate me to pay for other people’s health insurance” (Zorn 2017). We may find such a statement reprehensible but this sentiment reflects neoliberal ideas that separate us from one another: *your problems are not my problems*. Neoliberalism endeavors to make care a private responsibility. Accordingly, we are limited to adjudicating violations to Centeno’s rights rather than reformulating social systems that create disposable workers. In a perhaps unexpected manner, this paper challenges neoliberalism by attacking its underlying assumptions through an integration of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological ontology[[3]](#footnote-3) with care ethics. Rather than suggest policy and practice changes as many care theorists have persuasively offered (Engster 2007, Tronto 1994, 2013), I contend that Merleau-Ponty offers care theory an ontological path for decolonizing the contemporary mind from neoliberal thinking.

**Overview of the Argument**

In *The Visible and the Invisible,* Maurice Merleau-Ponty posits what has become known as the “reversibility thesis” to describe the radical ontological connection humans have to one another and the phenomenal world. In perhaps a far too cryptic explanation, the “reversibility” thesis can be described as the idea that because humans can be both subject (touching) and object (touched) in the phenomenal world, we share in existence (being). A “hyper-dialectic” is Merleau-Ponty’s term for a radical method of interrogating the world that eschews certainty or truth in favor of better and better understanding. This paper argues that in his reversibility thesis and hyperdialectical method,[[4]](#footnote-4) Merleau-Ponty provides care ethicists with further tools to construct a critical theory of care to counter neoliberalism and its resultant approach to governance which has caused precarity to permeate contemporary society. Specifically, I claim that the reversibility thesis points to an extremely deep ontological connection that we have to one another and the hyperdialectical method provides a practice for leveraging that intersubjective connection to its full potential in caring for one another.

In applying Merleau-Ponty’s intersubjective mind/body ontological approach to caring, this paper begins by addressing the implications of the reversibility thesis including both primal empathy and hyperdialectic method for living which is particularly apt for interrogating a relational and caring existence. For instance, Merleau-Ponty’s hyperdialectic implicates a sense of wonder for diverse intersectional experiences and an emergent normativity rather than *a priori* ethical structures typically used in moral theory. In other words, one does not come to situations presupposing answers or that there even is an answer to the question of what the right thing to do is. Given the ontological commitment to one another offered by Merleau-Ponty, the paper then turns to the philosophical assumptions of neoliberalism and the widespread precarity they have fostered. In particular, the steadfast devotion to individual liberty and freedom is critiqued for overlooking the fundamental relational being of humanity. Employing the primary sense of empathy that emerges from Merleau-Ponty’s work, the conclusion describes embodied care as a critical theory that both resists a possession-based approach to freedom in favor of a relation-based approach and reinforces the psycho-social dimensions of care that are equally significant as political practices and policies. Care is therefore embodied and ontological a well as personal and political.

**The Reversibility Thesis**

Although there is significant literature that addresses the intersection of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and feminist philosophy (Olkowski and Weiss 2004),there are relatively few interrogations of the relationship between Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body and care ethics (Hamington 2004, Brubaker 2006). This absence is perhaps somewhat surprising given their shared commitments to relational human ontology and particularism of experience. Because feminism gave rise to care ethics, and feminism has a longstanding concern for issues of embodiment, it appears that Merleau-Ponty’s work is ripe for exploration. In *Embodied Care*, I indicated that a robust ethic of care was best described as an approach to morality employing habits of the mind and body (2004). To make the argument, I utilized Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of perception, figure-background phenomenon, and his concept of the flesh to construct a corporeal approach to the epistemology of care. In this paper, my focus shifts to leveraging Merleau-Ponty’s relational ontology, particularly as it is developed in *The* *Visible and the Invisible*, to establish care as a way of human being. Specifically, Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility thesis claims we are radically interconnected. If care is indeed an ontic reality then the individualistic assumptions that underlie contemporary neoliberalism run counter to what might be described as our nature. The conclusion, then, is not simply that the arguments for liberalism are wrong, but that the presuppositions of liberalism (and thus neoliberalism)[[5]](#footnote-5) distort reality and can be resisted through a hyperdialectic of care.

Tantalizing, unfinished, and published posthumously, *The Visible and the Invisible* describes a perceptual approach to reality that intertwines us all—as subject and object, perceiver and perceived. Limited by language and the pervasiveness of dichotomous structures of thinking, Merleau-Ponty struggles to explain deep interconnectedness without postulating a singularity:

In a sense the whole of philosophy, as Husserl says, consists in restoring a power to signify, a birth of meaning, or a wild meaning, an expression of experience by experience, which in particular clarifies the special domain of language. And in a sense, as Valery said language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things the waves, and the forests. And what we have to understand is that there is no dialectical reversal from one of these views to the other; we do not have to reassemble them into a synthesis: they are two aspects of the reversibility which is the ultimate truth (1968, 155).

Merleau-Ponty is offering a non-dualistic ontology. It is through the “necessity” of ontology that Merleau-Ponty hopes to transcend contemporary crises in philosophy and politics (1968, 165). He points to a radical departure in philosophical thinking by claiming, “it has become necessary to start anew” (1968, xxiii).

Merleau-Ponty begins with a tactile approach by describing the difference and sameness of the experience of being touched and touching (1968, 133-134, 143). This reversibility presents a challenge to our modernist, categorical framework of understanding. Touching and being touched are discrete perceptual experiences and yet these experiences are understood in relation to one another through bodily perception. Anya Daly describes that for Merleau-Ponty, “The touching/touched are unified within the one system, which is the body, and so are symmetrical—there is overlapping and encroachment” (2016, 66). The difference between touching and touch is crucial because perception is not the same as being the object of perception. So, when one touches oneself, there is difference within the symmetry of experience (Dillon 1997, 159). There is unification in the body but the experience is non-coincidental—it is not felt or thought of as simultaneous and must be disambiguated in our understanding of the phenomenon. This reversibility or “identity-in-difference” (Daly 2016, 66) is the structure of our ontological connection to the world. We can grasp interiority and exteriority because we inhabit both. Accordingly, no one is entirely alien to me because I can apprehend an aspect of them in myself, yet they are not me (Dillon 1983, 377). Through touch, Merleau-Ponty recognizes the liminality of the self/other distinction: “it is precisely my body that perceives the body of another, and discovers in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions, a familiar way of dealing with the world” (1962, 354).

Merleau-Ponty makes a similar reversibility claim about the visible, or phenomenal world, and the invisible: “The visible can fill me and occupy me only because I who see it do not see it from the depths of nothingness, but from the midst of itself; I the seer am also visible” (113). For Merleau-Ponty, there is not a formulaic disjuncture of X sees object Y. Indeed, X sees and makes sense of Y because X and Y are phenomenally related, i.e. because Y is also a phenomenal object that can be seen. Dillon explains,

The ontological significance of this identity-within-difference needs to be stressed. Coincidence in self-perception is one of the grounds of the traditional isolation of the epistemological subject: it provides the basis for the theses of corrigibility of the first person experience and transparency in the sphere of immanence which lead to the radical bifurcation of interiority and exteriority or consciousness and thing/Other/world. Similarly, absolute disjunction of perceiving and being perceived also produces a discontinuity between being –a-subject and being-an-object. The only way to evade the trap of the polarizations of dualism is to take up the standpoint, adopted by Merleau-Ponty, of a fundamentally ambiguous identity-encompassing-difference. It is this ambiguity that Merleau-Ponty articulates in the thesis of reversibility (1997, 159).

There is interconnection and intertwining between phenomenal objects but not identity or sameness. Paradoxically, coincidental to interconnection, there is rupture, a chiasm, between touching and being touched as well as between being seen and seeing, yet each side of the perceptual non-coincidental experience is informed by the other and synthesthetically unified through the body (Dillon 1997, 160). For Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology captures both otherness and continuity.

Merleau-Ponty offers “flesh” as a radical concept for unified ontology marked by reversibility. The seeds for the ontological concept of flesh were planted earlier in Merleau-Ponty’s work. For example, in “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty moves from an expansive understanding of embodiment to positing an interconnected existence:

Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are incrusted into its flesh; they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the same stuff as the body (1964, 163).

Merleau-Ponty views “flesh” as a wholly novel idea: “There is no name in traditional philosophy to designate it” (1968, 139). He then labors to describe what flesh is: “The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. . . . [but rather] a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an ‘element’ of Being” (1968, 139).

Commentators have also negotiated within the limits of language to explain Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh. For Diana Coole, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh constitutes an “interworld where meaning and materiality are simply inseparable” (2007, 100). Daly writes that according to Merleau-Ponty, “the interworld is not something I resolve to live in; it pre-exists any decisions, underwrites any ethical pacts and ensures reciprocity and co-existence. The interworld is the primordial ‘we’, and in protecting the ‘we’, the welfare of the other is already my own and it is non-negotiable” (2016, 287). Similarly, Galen A. Johnson describes flesh as, “the ontological hinge on which the outside passes over to the inside and inside passes over to outside” (1999, 31). Challenging the modernist categorical thinking that underlies language (Hass 2008, 131), Merleau-Ponty uses flesh to discuss an ontology that recognizes ambiguity and is liminal, non-dualistic, embodied, and connected to others in the world. Flesh, the interworld[[6]](#footnote-6) between the intercorporeal and the intersubjective (Coole 2007, 242), defies rational attempts to understand it as merely the sum of its parts. Because of its primal interconnectedness, the interworld is the flesh of the political and thus posits the political as originary rather than a socially constructed addition. In this context, political means the negotiation between individuals which for Merleau-Ponty takes place on the interior at the level of being and not just in the public square. Merleau-Ponty is describing relationality at an ontological depth that is beyond how care theorists have historically characterized the relationality of care.

**Deepening the Notion of a Relational Ontology**

Many theorists, including myself, refer to the underlying relational ontology that supports care ethics (Hamington 2017, 267; Nortvedt et al 2011, 194-196; Pettersen 2011, 52-53; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 100; Robinson 1999, 110; and, Sevenhuijsen 1998, 10). Their use of “relational ontology” refers more often to psycho-social and existential sense of identity and self rather than to a strictly philosophical understanding of ontology as the study of being. For example, Robinson describes, “a critical ethics of care begins from a relational ontology; it highlights the extent to which people ‘live and perceive the world within social relationships’ while, at the same time, recognizing that people use relationships to construct and express both power and knowledge” (110). The arguments for relational ontology among care ethicists are usually developmental in nature suggesting that humans are social animals that need one another to care for one another given our fundamental vulnerabilities or we will not survive. Such claims are not challenged here. However, if we take the reversibility thesis seriously, particularly through Daly’s compelling analysis, Merleau-Ponty is claiming more than the idea that a relational ontology leads to a relational ethic. He is arguing that we are radically connected to the extent that empathy and relational ethics *is* who we are. By claiming the ontological connection through the reversibility of the flesh, Merleau-Ponty is suggesting that the relational ethic is already extant in the self.

Daly captures the depth of the intersubjective ontology proposed by the reversibility thesis for which the reader may recognize similarities to themes found in the work of Husserl and Levinas:

The reversibility thesis is the thesis that self, other and world are inherently relational, not in the obvious and trivial sense that they stand in relation to each other, can affect each other, that there are actual and potential causal connections between them. This without question is so and these relations occur between entities that are external to each other. Merleau-Ponty’s Reversibility Thesis, however, proposes that self, other and world are internally related, that there is interdependence at the level of ontology. What does it mean to be internally related? The Other, whether other subjectivities or the otherness of the world and things, is essential for self-awareness and vice versa. No self can be apprehended without an-other. Ipseity and alterity are mutually dependent and this interdependence is both pervasive and intrinsic (2016, 65).

As Daly indicates, Merleau-Ponty is challenging some of the fundamental questions of philosophy in addressing the problem of other minds as well as other bodies in creating a non-dualistic ontology. Similarly, David Morris describes the seer and the seen as the ontological reverse of one another: “different shapes or inflections of one and the same being. ‘Reversibility’ designates this phenomenal and ontological complicity of the seer and the seen and the perceiver and perceived in general, and designates this complicity as a function of being (not merely the perceiver): Being that is reversibly perceiver and perceived” (2010, 144). Rather than discrete action, experience is only fully realized in the totality of perception and being perceived. For Merleau-Ponty, we understand one another because, we are “like organs of one single intercoporeality” (1968, 142). What of deep divisions among humans and the conflict and violence that occurs? The identity-within-difference offered by Merleau-Ponty’s ontology is not Pollyannaish in regard to disagreement and divergence. What Merleau-Ponty is pointing out is the fundamental ability of human beings to find themselves in others. There may be disagreement but there is always hope for collaboration given this relational ontology.

Merleau-Ponty did not have the benefit of engaging the contemporary field of care ethics. Although many care theorists have implicitly or explicitly framed care ethics as a recasting of traditional philosophical approaches to normative morality, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body gestures toward what Joan Tronto‘s description of humanity’s essential caring being (2017). Despite rampant neoliberal narratives of individualism that reinforce our alienation from one another, we cannot avoid our fundamental connection and the primacy of empathy as an important aspect of care.

**Primary Empathy**

One of the implications of Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility thesis is an ontological basis for understanding empathy in human intersubjectivity. If through the flesh, the phenomenal world is within us, then the starting place for bridging alterity is also within us. Reversibility makes the intersubjective world possible in a such a way that we do not confront wholly “other” persons but rather engage people with whom we have existing internal connections that can be drawn upon. In other words, fellow-feelings are built into our mind-bodies. Daly refers to the ontological character of fellow-feelings as “primary empathy”:

I propose that empathy as fellow-feeling is an essential mode of intentionality, integral to the primary level of subjectivity/intersubjectivity, which is crucial to our survival as individuals and as a species. . . . empathy is not derived on the basis of intersubjectivity, nor does it merely disclose intersubjectivity; rather it is constitutive of intersubjectivity *at the primary level.* Empathy is a direct, irreducible intentionality separable in thought from the other primary intentional modes of perception, memory and imagination, but co-arising with these (2016, 225).

Daly utilizes the reversibility thesis to further nest Merleau-Pontian ethics within ontology (2016, 231). In other words, to be human is to empathize. If care ethics is indeed a radical reconsideration of what it is be human rather than just a normative theory of ethics, the questions shift from positive considerations of what it takes to motivate care to questions regarding why we do not care more given our primary empathy. Empathetic is who we are as human. As Douglas Low describes, in Merleau-Ponty’s ethics, “there is here an empathy and identification with the other, an overlapping of ego boundaries to include others. Morality then has its source the recognition of human beings as human beings” (Low 1994, 181). No one would deny that humans have blood running through their veins or are capable of thinking. Similarly, what is suggested here is that empathy is an ontological aspect of humanity and no one should deny the capability of humans to empathize.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Many care theorists address the role of empathy (Hamington 2015a, 2017; Noddings, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Verducci 2000), but perhaps none has placed so much emphasis on the centrality of empathy for care ethics as Michael Slote (2007, 2010). Slote contends that care should be referred to as “empathetic care” (2007, 14). He endeavors to frame care as a normative theory of ethics for which empathy adjudicates the rightness and wrongness of acts. Ultimately, Slote argues that empathy is the defining and central element of a normative theory of care. For Slote, actions can be deemed morally right or wrong and “contrary to moral obligation” depending upon whether, “they reflect or exhibit or express an absence (or lack) of fully developed empathic concern for (or caring about) others on the part of the agent” (2007, 31). Slote criticizes liberal thinking for overlooking emotion and supporting a deontological approach that is inadequate to a variety of moral conflicts which are better addressed by care (2007, 80-81). Despite his criticisms of liberalism, Slote is still postulating care ethics as an alternative normative theory. In this manner, he implicitly uses the language of liberalism in terms of individual agents who have moral obligations and act in ways that can be clearly adjudicated as right or wrong. Slote’s reliance on virtue theory reinforces the atomistic ontology of liberalism: “I have argued that the individual trait or virtue of (empathetic) caring is ethically more fundamental than caring relationships” (2007, 86). Slote’s work has added tremendously to the care scholarship on empathy, but his formulation is perhaps not as radical as he suggests or as fundamental to being as care ethics requires. What Merleau-Ponty has done is to intertwine ethics into ontology rather than overlay psychological or sociological relational forces.

The above critique of Slote is not to deny the existence of those psychological or sociological forces but Merleau-Ponty offers care theorists something much more radical and powerful in the notion of primary empathy. Usually, the driving motivation for care ethical thinking has been interrogating how to expand the circle of care to include unfamiliar others (Slote 2007,11). However, the reversibility thesis suggests we have a primordial connection to others and a predilection for empathy which indicates that rather than interrogating how to expand the circle, perhaps the question is *why don’t we exhibit greater care for one another given our primary empathy?* What prevents the actualization of our intersubjective being?

Of course, empathy is an essential starting place for care but in the spirit of Merleau-Ponty’s non-dualistic, non-coincidental ontology, empathy is not a binary state as represented by existence or absence. Feelings and cognitive understandings supporting empathy can be refined or strengthened through inquiry, broadly defined. This refinement process is essential to quality care. Without inquiry, without the questioning to better understand the other and their context, care can be disastrously insufficient or misplaced. Empathy is also not a sufficient condition of care because any number of factors may prevent empathy from being actualized into action. Care is an action responsive to the needs and context of the person cared for, utilizing the best understanding possible (Sevenhuijsen 2000) and this can include and be supported by what is fundamentally shared at the level of being between the care-giver and the one cared-for. Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the hyperdialectic offers care theorists a method for empathy attunement consistent with the relational ontology of the flesh.

**Hyperdialectics of Care and Emergent Normativity**

To summarize the journey of this paper thus far, Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility thesis suggests a deep relational ontology that finds ethics originary including a primary empathy. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological ontology and its relational character not only vindicate care theory, it suggests that the notion of care can be used to describe a phenomenon that exceeds a normative theory of ethics. This section addresses Merleau-Ponty’s notion of a hyperdialectic to discuss agential methods of caring being. In other words, the ontological primary empathy does not negate a role for human agency

Merleau-Ponty offers a method of being described as a “hyperdialectic” that differs from extant dialectical approaches. Traditionally, a dialectic refers to a method of rational argument and truth seeking that involves some sort of contradictory process between opposing sides. The hyperdialectic, however, is a complex engaging of many relationships through language within the ambiguous complexity of human experience. Merleau-Ponty contrasts dialectical approaches:

The bad dialectic begins almost with the dialectic, and there is no good dialectic but that which criticizes itself and surpasses itself as a separate statement; the only good dialectic is the hyperdialectic …What we call hyperdialectic is a thought that on the contrary is capable of reaching truth because it envisages without restriction the plurality of the relationships and what has been called ambiguity (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 94).

Michael Berman describes Merleau-Ponty’s hyperdialectic as self-reflexive and indicative of an interrogative mode of existence that is always questing and questioning. This interrogation is not only cognitive but sensual as well— “our tactile senses always explore the world” (Berman 2003, 405). Merleau-Ponty is once again traversing modernist categories by intertwining epistemology into ontology (and ultimately in service of ethics) by identifying “question-knowing” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 137) as a liminal quality of being in the interrogative mode of existence. Rajiv Kaushik describes the hyperdialectic as adding layers of analysis to the epistemic process as the subject reflects on the act of reflecting as well as the object of reflection, accumulating perspectives to consider in knowledge creation. Accordingly, the hyperdialectic, “is a concrete site from where both the act of reflection and the thing upon which it reflects, subject and being, take their separate shape” (Kaushik 2013, 6). The hyperdialectic approach implies humility in that categorical absolute truth is impossible and problematizes the distance between knower and the known. Merleau-Ponty’s desire to confront experience and all its ambiguities is evident in this approach. Taminiaux characterizes the hyperdialectic method as “gliding back and forth between ambiguity and synthesis” (1980, 73). More than scientific inquiry, the hyperdialectic confronts the world with a sense of wonder in pursuit of an understanding that Merleau-Ponty had previously suggested was the purpose of phenomenology (1962, xii-ix, xvii-xix). The hyperdialectic reflects the situatedness of the mind-body as we question and make meaning from our visceral experience.

The kind of engagement necessary for caring suggests a need for the complex interconnections found in Merleau-Ponty’s hyperdialectic method. Caring is a quest for knowledge (Dalmiya 2002, 49), broadly defined, not simply through intellectual inquiry but through all that is brought to each human encounter in the flesh. The habits of caring include the epistemic skills of listening, questioning, learning, and growing--broadly and complexly construed to match the vicissitudes and richness of human existence. For example, the resources for effective responsive care must include understanding the intersectional identity. Intersectional identity refers to the multiplicity of socially meaningful characteristics including, but not limited to race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, etc. that influence how individuals are treated both in terms of oppression and privilege (Crenshaw 1991, 1244-1245). Acknowledging intersectionality contributes to the contextual learning necessary to effectively provide responsive care in any given situation. (Hamington 2015b). A hyperdialectic method is compatible with such an approach. Caring is embedded in learning not for the sake of accumulating disjointed facts, but emerges from the reversibility between self and other in the flesh: the fundamental connection we have with others in our perceptual experience.

Accordingly, caring knowledge is just as much about the self as it is about others. Care can be described as a form of inquiry (Hamington 2017) and the “hyperdialectic of care” captures the complexity and ambiguity of caring inquiry, removing it from the modernist understanding of epistemology as a quest for certain and definitive knowledge. Hyperdialectic is suggestive of a verb rather than a noun—an open-ended journey rather than a definitive location. Sarah La Chance Adams describes hyperdialectic as addressing ambivalence, “the truth in the relation between terms—neither being nor nothingness, but becoming” (La Chance Adams 2011, 177-178). The notion of hyperdialectic as a type of becoming is apt because of the intertwining of ontology, epistemology, and ethics. The engagement with other is not an isolated transaction between separate autonomous agents but something much more sticky and complex. Such engagement is a non-coincidental reconnection with self in the other that manifests agency but in a manner that is the realization of potential within oneself and linked to others in the contiguity of the flesh. Merleau-Ponty has provided a means for better understanding ontological and epistemic aspects of caring.

Merleau-Ponty is not afraid to address the ambiguity of existence by challenging dichotomies of mind/body, object/subject, immanence/transcendence, self/other, and action/reflection. One strategy that Merleau-Ponty employs is to emphasize emergence over static category. As Scott Marratto describes, “Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy pointedly aims to avoid any kind of reification of the subject, either as a mind *or* as a body and instead seeks to understand subjectivity as a dynamic an open-ended process of emergence. Subjectivity emerges with the emergence of meaning in the world on the basis of the self-articulating character of living movement*”* (2012, 2). Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility thesis and hyperdialectic supports the notion that normativity is emergent from relational experience. In Western philosophy, normative ethics has described efforts to provide a general theory that describes how people ought to live. Deontological, teleological, and virtue theories are dominant approaches to moral normativity. Many scholars view care ethics as an alternative to mainstream theories. However, taking Merleau-Ponty’s ontology seriously suggests a different framing for care ethics. Through the good dialectic, the hyperdialectic, engagement with the other is revelatory: I learn about the other and myself in context. Part of the epiphany is understanding the caring response called for in the moment. In other words, I do not know the best way to care for someone until I understand them and their situation. My experiences and habits of caring may indicate possible actions, but I will not know what to do until the potential caring action emerges from what I learn of the other’s needs. Invoking a rule or the calculation of consequences is not sufficiently responsive because it is an abstract imposition into the phenomenon. Coole argues that the hyperdialectic “is not a rationalist formula imposed on Being but a practising where existence folds over itself” (Coole 2007. 110). Applying the hyperdialectic, a care approach is quite different from standard notions of ethical normativity that offer *a priori* rules, formulas, or structures to determining moral action. Emergent normativity is a moral demand that arises from within the individual and reconnects them with their primary empathy and continuity in the flesh. I must be willing to listen, learn, be creative, and act in order to effectively care.

For Hegel, dialectic involves the reconciliation of ostensible paradoxes to

arrive at absolute truth. Merleau-Ponty’s notion of hyperdialectic engages more complexity and ambiguity:

What then is obsolete is not the dialectic but the pretension of terminating it in an end of history, in a permanent revolution, or in a regime which, being the contestation of itself would no longer need to be contested from the outside and, in fact would no longer have anything outside it ([1954] 2007, 295).

Applying care to hyperdialectic method signifies that to realize our best selves—a flourishing of our nature or ontology--our primary empathy must be attuned for efficacious action. **A hyperdialectic of care, then, describes an engaged and immersive method for living that leverages our relational ontology to seek better understanding of others and ourselves.** This method of inquiry circles back to recognize that interrogation of unfamiliar others is also an interrogation of self. It is humble to its core with a sincere desire to listen, understand, and act not just in terms of a single moral event but in an iterative fashion that co-creates self, other, and context. The hyperdialectic of care combines Nel Noddings notion of, “I am here for you” (1984, 5) with a sense of wonder in the face of the world (Bannon 2011, 328). The hyperdialectic acknowledges the physical and social location of the mind/body. Our positionality needs to be interrogated for its limitations of perspective and yet it provides a location from which care can flow.

To summarize, the notion of the hyperdialectic of care is a method for living that acknowledges and supports our relational being. The next section addresses the dominant economic and political ideological operant today which appears to run counter to a caring relational ontology.

**Neoliberal Precarity**

Liberalism is understood as a general political theoretical movement aimed toward individual freedom and democracy that has predominated modern Western thought. Striking an effective balance between freedom and social welfare has been a struggle for industrialized societies in the 20th and 21st centuries. The need to stimulate economies in the post-World War II era witnessed a wave of economic liberalization and another upsurge came in response to the stagflation of the 1970’s and 1980’s exemplified by the policies of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. In reaction to these developments, neoliberalism has become a pejorative moniker utilized by those critical of current economic and political trends surrounding the power of capital (Thorsen 2010, 188). The term neoliberalism is employed to describe both economic and political phenomena (Davies 2014). In either case, the characterizations are similar. Anna-Maria Blomgren offers a representative definition: “Neoliberalism is commonly thought of as a political philosophy giving priority to individual freedom and the right to private property. It is not, however, the simple and homogeneous philosophy it might appear to be. It ranges over a wide expanse in regard to ethical foundations as well as to normative conclusions” (1997, 224). Similarly, David Harvey describes neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade” (2005, 2).

Merleau-Ponty died prior to the term “neoliberalism” came into usage, but he did have much to say about liberalism that might be applied to today’s concerns about neoliberalism. For example, in lamenting the events leading to World War II, Merleau-Ponty found the ideals of, “liberty, truth, happiness, and transparent relations among men” desirable but lacking the “infrastructure to make them participate in existence” ([1945]2007, 53). Sonia Kruks describes Merleau-Ponty as finding liberalism, “formal, abstract, and divorced from social reality” (1977, 398). For Merleau-Ponty, liberalism attempts to map general rational and abstract frameworks onto social and political phenomenon that is embodied and ambiguous. In this manner, liberalism is too far removed from experience that is much better accounted for in a phenomenological and hyperdialectical approach. Unfortunately, neoliberalism has as its impact a precarious existence for many people.

Some trace the increase in the use of the term “precarity” to the rise of global neoliberalism, particularly in the latter part of the 20th century (Lewis *et al* 2015, 281) although we can find similar ideas in Marx (1978, 294-438). Precarity is growing and inconsistently distributed to those who lack accumulated unearned privilege. This precarity can manifest in many ways including but not limited to contingent labor, disproportional incarceration, less-than-meaningful work, labor exploitation, inhospitable behavior toward migrants and refugees, and inordinate concern for physical harm. For example, some theorists contend that the growing numbers of contingent migrant workers represents a separate working class whose experience of precarity makes it distinct from other working classes (Lewis *et al* 2015, 584).

Political theorist Isabell Lorey describes three dimensions of the precarious: precariousness, precarity, and governmental precarization (2015, 10-15). In Lorey’s lexicon, precariousness describes the fundamental vulnerability for which all living beings exist. Importantly for discussions of care ethics, Lorey describes precariousness as “always relational” as it is part of the shared human experience (2015, 12). For Lorey, precarity describes the ordering and distribution of precariousness in society (2015, 12). Governmental precarization covers a wide swath of lived experience, both economic and personal, as well as various forms of governing including formal political organizations and self-governing efforts (2015, 12-14). Lorey argues that creating fear and vulnerability is actually an intentional strategy and instrument of neoliberal governing policy (2015, 63-71). However, she finds in care and connection a potential resistant force to precarization: “I am interested in developing a political and social theoretical perspective that starts from connectedness with others and takes different dimensions of the precarious into consideration” (2015, 10). Lorey views neoliberal precarity as an “interruption” of our fundamental caring relationships (2015, 99).

Neoliberalism can wreak havoc on the well-being of many people. Without romanticizing a time before the rise of neoliberalism or that simple material attainment or distributive justice can eradicate precarity, I want to suggest that a critical theory of care that includes the relational ontology offered by Merleau-Ponty can challenge the assumptions of neoliberalism. These assumptions include an extreme notion of autonomy and independence, an acquisitive and possessive disposition as well as the idea of freedom and liberty as absolute good. One of the challenges of neoliberalism is that many of its assumptions have wormed their way into common policy and practice as well as folk wisdom as common sense.

Liberalism, and by extension neoliberalism, draw on Enlightenment era valorizations of autonomy and independence. One result of this hyper individualization is a fragmented society marked by transitory associations as described by Lorey, “It is not only work that is precarious and dispersed, but life itself. In all their differences, the precarious tend to be isolated and individualized, because they do short-term jobs, get by from project to project, and often fall through collective social security systems” (2015, 9). The notion of intersubjectivity and the ontological continuity of the flesh problematize the idea of autonomy and independence. For example, “rational self-interest” is a common-sense approach in discussing consumer behavior, voter behavior, business behavior as well as any number of social actions. However, if that “self” is reconceptualized as ontologically tied to others, then rational self-interest becomes rational shared interest. Accordingly, my significant decisions should take into consideration the care of other stakeholders, not because of an abstract moral motivation but because they are me. Although imperfectly so, I have the ability to cognitively and viscerally understand the precarity of others and I cannot hide behind a narrative that promotes the idea that everyone will be better off if I only act on behalf of myself. A truly relational ontology must conclude that I am not independent and I never was.

Neoliberalism also favors an acquisitive disposition—both materially and socio-politically (Wilson 2014). Not only is capital accumulation valorized but so are rights. Accordingly, the path to greater flourishing is through legally guaranteed privileges. Unfortunately, such possession or ownership is not sufficient condition to realize the desired result. For example, the acquisition of civil rights may be an important milestone of personal voice and freedom but a law alone can never actualize the everyday experience of human freedom. However, a community committed to a hyperdialectic approach from a position of primary empathy is in a much better position to insure the flourishing of individuals. Life is not a zero-sum game to compete for acquisitions, material or otherwise. A relational ontology suggests that in acknowledging and accepting our intersubjectivity, we flourish in the well-being of others.

Neoliberalism also places liberty as an ultimate good (Ives 2015, 8). However, that liberty is usually understood as individual liberty: a desire to be free. A relational ontology as expressed in intersubjective identity suggests that liberty is not an absolute good. I do not want to be freed from the ties to my family, friends, community, society but I want to flourish with them as part of my web of relationships. Absolute liberty is a myth and undesirable as incompatible with our fundamental connected being.

In many ways, care is the antithesis of neoliberalism and a relational ontology reinforces the idea that we must find common cause in mutual well-being. Accordingly, the precariousness of others is my precariousness.

**Conclusion: A Critical Theory of Care Reframes the Quest for Security**

The fact of embodiment and its ambiguities dispels the acquisitive myth of neoliberal security. No amount of acquired political rights, social privileges or economic wealth can prevent the ultimate death of the body. There is no fundamental external certainty or security. The quest for social justice can contribute to compassion and amelioration however the relational ontology of humanity points to relationships as the abiding solace in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty. Our love and care for one another, our memories, our collective embrace is the security that this existence has to offer.

In a fitting inaugural for *The International Journal of Care and Caring,* Joan Tronto offers a compelling analysis of humanity ‘s caring nature in service of a democratic form of care that challenges neoliberalism (2017). Tronto also provides a thorough critique of neoliberalism from a care perspective. In particular, she finds that within a neoliberal framework, care becomes dominated by economic concerns and therefore bounded by rationality, the market, and privatization. According to Tronto, the message to individuals within a neoliberal ideology is:

Care for yourself by acting rationally and responsibly; if there are care needs that you cannot meet for yourself, then use market solutions; and, finally, if you cannot afford market solutions, or prefer to care on your own, then enlist family (and perhaps friends and charities) to meet your caring needs (2017, 30).

Tronto describes this truncated care within neoliberalism as “unhealthy” (2017, 30) because it fails to recognize that humans are ontologically caring--*homines curans.*  She calls for modern society to reorganize itself to place relationality, solidarity, and care at the center of political practices and behaviors as befitting our underlying caring selves.

The application of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach to ontology supports Tronto’s conclusions and contributes a bridge between the personal and the political. Merleau-Ponty recognizes that political change alone, no matter how relational the narrative, must be accompanied by personal transformation and connection to be actualized in through experience: “The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is in exhaustible” (1962, xvi-xvii). As Kruks explains, for Merleau-Ponty “must become lived values, embodied in the structures of daily life and cease to be intellectual abstractions” (1977, 398). Neoliberalism is insidious because of how this worldview has been internalized. If we simply regard what happened to Carlos Centeno as sad or unfortunate then we become victims of neoliberal hegemony as well and little has occurred to prevent the next such tragedy as we become complicit in neoliberal thinking. We must find Centeno’s story in ourselves and resolve to live in such a way as to care for one another, personally and politically. A method of living that can oppose neoliberal attempts to bound and limit care is the hyperdialectic: a search for understanding that connects as well as confronts. We must resist Walsh’s conclusion and creeping neoliberal hegemony of the personal and political. Accordingly, we should understand, empathize, and act to mitigate one another’s burdens and ameliorate society, not because of abstract rights or imposed moral duties but rather because of our shared being and flesh where empathy resides and can actualize caring action.

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1. Many thanks to Michael Flower, Frans Vosman, and Per Nortvedt whose careful reading and critical analysis significantly contributed to this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The negligence in Centeno’s case may have been egregious but not unusual given the increasing utilization of contingent labor. Depending upon the definition of contingent labor, the percentage of the U.S. labor force in these positions varies from 5 to 40%. However, the number of contingent laborers is on the rise (Murray and Gillibrand, 2015). It can be argued that contingent labor can provide workers with flexibility and may be desirable for some, however, workers generally desire security and consistency not afforded in this trajectory. Similarly, migrant workers face precarious working conditions. For example, in a 2016 survey of non-government organizations who work with temporary and seasonal foreign workers, sponsored by the Canadian Council for Refugees, respondents reported concerns about violation of workers’ rights (43%), lack of job security (39%), financial problems (31%), racism (25%), inadequate housing (24%), unsafe working conditions (23%), and debt from recruitment fees (13%) (2016, 9). Contingent and migrant labor are only two aspects of contemporary social precariousness driven by the implementation of neoliberal policies and practices of free markets. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ontology, or the branch of metaphysics which addresses the study of being, is a source of robust philosophical discussion with significant distinctions as witnessed in the other contributions to this volume. This paper does not offer a comprehensive discussion of ontology but rather focuses on the operative ontological assumptions suggested by neoliberal thinking versus care ethical thinking. Specifically, the role of relationality in ontological thinking is addressed in subsequent sections. Carefully defining terms is crucial to ontological conversations. The use of relational ontology here is particularly pragmatic in service of addressing contemporary social morality. As such, the use of the term “ontology” in this paper should not be taken as necessarily in opposition to those who question the role of ontology at all in normative considerations such as in Dewey or Putnam (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Merleau-Ponty’s notions of hyperdialectic and reversibility thesis do not lend themselves to easy explanations and each are more fully discussed later in this paper. He offers the idea of hyperdialectic as an improvement to Hegel’s dialectical method as a complex means for interrogating a dilemma including questioning the interrogation itself. The reversibility thesis is a means for explaining the phenomena of human beings as both subjects and objects in a manner that connects us all to one another. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The terms “liberalism” and “neoliberalism” have distinct usages and complex histories that are not delineated fully in this paper. “Neoliberalism” is used here to describe a contemporary social and political movement that emphasizes competitiveness and advocates marketizing social institutions resulting in the creation of inequality. For a comprehensive literature review of the history of neoliberalism see Davies 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The term “interworld” is an effort at describing how people are not completely alienated from what one another are feeling on the interior: “We must reject the prejudice which makes ‘inner realities’’ out of love, hate or anger, leaving them accessible to one single witness: the person who feels them. Anger, shame, hate, and love are not psychic facts hidden at the bottom of another’s consciousness:  they are types of behavior or styles of conduct which

   are visible from the outside. They exist on this face or in those gestures, not hidden behind them” (Merleau-Ponty, 1970, 5253). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As I indicated in *Embodied Care*, humans are “built to care” (Hamington 2004, 31) However, being built for care and actualizing care are two different things. This is one reason why I believe that a performative framework (Hamington 2015a) is a particularly apt method for describing and understanding the caring person. A performance is an action in the world that displays both agency of choice and influence over self-identity in the iteration of habits. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)