

Attunements of Care – The Art of Existence in the Anthropocene

JAN VARPANEN

Tampere University

jan.varpanen@tuni.fi

JOHANNA KALLIO

Tampere University

johanna.kallio@tuni.fi

ANTTI SAARI

Tampere University

antti.saari@tuni.fi

SONJA HELKALA

Tampere University

sonja.helkala@tuni.fi

LIILA HOLMBERG

Tampere University

liila.holmberg@tuni.fi

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ABSTRACT

The ecological crisis places an unavoidable ethical imperative for the conscientious adult: to learn an art of existing in a way that supports life instead of destroying it. The paper suggests that care is a useful conceptual resource for responding to this imperative. An interpretation of the art of existence is presented by bringing together two different takes on care, the Foucauldian tradition of care of the self and feminist ethics of care. This novel connection is argued to hold theoretical promise for making sense of the unique challenge of self-cultivation implied by the art of existence in the Anthropocene.

Introduction

Our knowledge of the present points to a peculiar convergence. On the one hand, human influence on the Earth has reached the point where it has been argued to constitute a geological era; on the other hand, the destructive effects of this influence have revealed to us that we are not the center of the universe. As a result, the conscientious adult living in these times is faced with a unique ethical imperative: responsible living now requires a complete transformation of who we are and how we lead our lives. The Anthropos is not at home in the Anthropocene.

In our interpretation, this ethical imperative calls for a type of education variously called self-cultivation, care of the self, self-transformation, or self-education. The task set for conscientious adults is to educate themselves to learn how to practice an as-yet-undiscovered art of existence in the Anthropocene. However, as we have argued elsewhere (Varpanen et al., 2022), the traditional concepts of self-cultivation – including self-education, self-transformation, and care of the self – are not entirely adequate to the task at hand (Varpanen et al., 2022). Thus, adult-educational theorizing does not yet have the necessary conceptual apparatus to help the conscientious adult in the existential challenge they face (Kallio, forthcoming).

To remedy the shortcomings of some forms of self-cultivation, this article provides a sketch of the art of existence as a practice centered around care. Care is certainly not a novel concept in the discussions about what to do to live more sustainably (see, e.g., van Dooren, 2014; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tammi et al., 2020). What we hope to introduce to the discussion surrounding this concept is a synthesis of two positions that so far have not conversed with each other. On the one hand, in speaking of an art of existence, we build on the Foucauldian concept of care of the self, which is one of the prominent options for conceptualizing self-cultivation (see, e.g., De Marzio, 2012; Olssen, 2006; Tennant, 2012). On the other hand, feminist ethics of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; see also Tronto, 1993) has explored care as a way of rethinking the relations between the human and the more than human. Jussi Backman (2020) has argued that the Foucauldian take on care is focused on the self, whereas feminist ethics of care is part of a tradition where care is oriented towards the world. We suggest that bringing these two interpretations of care together makes possible a conceptualization of self-cultivation where care for the self and care for others become inseparable. Such

a concept may prove helpful in addressing the (adult) educational challenges of our time.

We build our argument in four steps by drawing on four theoretical resources. We start by situating our conceptualization in the broad framework of the art of existence, or care of the self, as explored in Foucault's later works (1997a; 1997b; 2001). Our second step is to utilize Gilles Deleuze's (2001) work to argue that care of the self depends on life as an ongoing event. Our reading of Deleuze shows that life is an open-ended question that we care about and that requires caring for. We use Deleuze as a glue to connect Foucault's care of the self to feminist ethics of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tronto, 1993). Making this connection allows us to view the art of existence as a life-affirming practice where care for the self and care for others become intertwined. An important caveat, which we make with reference to Jean-Luc Nancy, is that the community implied by this intertwinement arises out of being-with, that is, across difference. In concluding our paper, we draw on the personal experience of one of the authors to consider gardening as an illustrative if unconventional example of this caring art of existence in the Anthropocene.

The Art of Existence

The art of existence is a broad practice that encompasses one's whole life. What we hope to argue is that when this practice is understood in terms of care, it becomes a compass for leading an ethically sustainable life in the shadow of the Anthropocene. Our argument starts from a few suggestions by Michel Foucault:

What strikes me is the fact that, in our society, art has become something that is related only to objects and not to individuals or to life. – – But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life? (Foucault, 1997, p. 261)

It is important to emphasize that what is 'artistic' about the art of existence is the form of the practice rather than its aims. That is, we are advocating an artistic approach to existence as a form of ethical action rather than a moral law to be followed. Here we follow Daniel Smith's (2015) reading of Foucault's later work as being centrally concerned with providing an understanding of ethics that does not take its form from the idea of law.

Two aspects are central to the form that the art of existence takes. Smith argues, firstly, that when one takes one's life as a work of art, the subject fully coincides with its object. The result is that the artist is as much created by their artwork as the work is by the artist (Smith, 2015, pp. 140–142). The coincidence of the subject of the activity with the activity itself connects the concept of art to the existentially weighty concept of aesthetics on offer in the ancient texts Foucault explores (Smith, 2015). This is to say that art here has little to do with beauty as something that is appealing to the senses. Beauty is rather understood as manifesting a certain ethical goodness. This existentially weighty interpretation of aesthetics is taken as given in the majority of contemporary theorizations of art and its education (see, e.g., Hickey-Moody, 2016; MacGill, 2019; Ylirisku, 2021).

The second central aspect is the relation between creativity and freedom that characterizes the art of existence as a form of ethics. Foucault (1980) differentiates his conception from that of Sartre by highlighting that there is no authenticity to be had here. The point is rather to connect the “relation one has to oneself to a creative activity” (p. 262). Elsewhere, Foucault puts this creative bend more beautifully:

I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would not try to judge, but bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea-foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply, not judgments, but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes – all the better. All the better. (Foucault, 1997c, p. 323)

This passage adds a bit more detail to what the existentially weighty concept of aesthetics concretely means. In a word, in our understanding aesthetics is a celebration and affirmation – even love – of life (e.g., Blom et al., 2020; Orr, 2004; see also van Dooren, 2014). What we understand by the art of existence is precisely this: to be attentive to what can be brought to life.

As a life-affirming creativity, the art of existence is a response to the problem of freedom, that is, to the problem that we are free to lead our lives as we choose (Foucault, 1997b). Perhaps this freedom has been part of the human condition for millennia (Roney & Rossi, 2021). However, the crises of the contemporary world have undoubtedly thrown the

surrounding issues into relief in unprecedented ways. Every day, the conscientious adult faces a new set of bad news of how our habitual ways of living affect the environment in destructive ways. The art of existence responds to the question of how to lead our lives, given that we are free and thereby capable of destruction.

Here we come to the relation between the art of existence and care. In Foucault's work, the art of existence is equivalent to care of the self. The notion of care of the self (Lat. *cura sui*) refers to various historical practices and techniques dating in the Greco-Roman and early Christian periods that have shaped contemporary Western societies and forms of subjectivity in various ways (e.g. Foucault, 2001; Hadot, 2002; Nussbaum, 2013). The purpose of these practices was to help a person pay attention to the way they conduct themselves in life given the freedom to conduct oneself as one wishes (Foucault, 1997b). In interpreting care of the self as a type of self-cultivation, we rely on the well-established literature which sees care of the self as part of ethical self-work (e. g., Ball, 2017; Hadot, 2002; Sloterdijk, 2012;). Ultimately, the aim of the care of the self was to live a beautiful life, in the ethical sense discussed above (Berger, 2018; Foucault, 1997b; Smith, 2015). For us, this is the same as leading a life that does not destroy the environment, although to attribute this idea to the Greeks would be anachronistic.

The interconnectedness of care and aesthetics has also been noted by others (see e.g. Saito, 2022; Thompson 2022). According to Saito (2022), the commonalities of care ethics and aesthetic experience rise from the fundamental relationality of our self and the world and the interdependent nature of our existence. Similarly, to our interpretation of the art of existence, Saito sees care as offering a site where the ethical and the aesthetic are integrated and deeply entrenched in ways of cultivating a virtuous way of living. Thompson (2022) suggests that care can be an aesthetic practice, a craft-like capacity to shape and mend the world around.

A crucial part of our argument is that, as the core of the art of existence, ‘care’ should be read in two senses simultaneously. On the one hand, we are talking about *caring about* life in the sense that it matters how one chooses to live. This dimension of care touches on the existential question of the meaning of life. On the other hand, we are talking about *caring for* life, in the sense that life needs nurturing. This latter sense includes but is not limited to the physical sustenance a life needs (See Puig de la

Bellacasa, 2017, p. 4; Tronto, 1993, pp. 105–108). The intertwining of these two aspects is very much present in Foucault's writings, although he does not directly connect them to his view of life as a work of art (see Foucault, 2001, p. 9; p. 97).

What Is Life?

A delicate question is raised here: if the art of existence is care of the self in the double sense of caring about life and caring for life, what is this life that we care about/for? To answer this question, we take a sidestep from Foucault and consider a passage from the work of another French thinker of the same generation: Gilles Deleuze.

What is immanence? A life... No one has described what a life is better than Charles Dickens, if we take the indefinite article as an index of the transcendental. A disreputable man, a rogue, held in contempt by everyone, is found as he lies dying. Suddenly, those taking care of him manifest an eagerness, respect, even love, for his slightest sign of life. Everybody bustles about to save him, to the point where, in his deepest coma, this wicked man himself senses something soft and sweet penetrating him. But to the degree that he comes back to life, his saviors turn colder, and he becomes once again mean and crude. Between his life and his death, there is a moment that is only that of a life playing with death. The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life, that is, from the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens: a "Homo tantum" with whom everyone empathizes and who attains a sort of beatitude. It is haecceity no longer of individuation but of singularization: a life of pure immanence, neutral, beyond good and evil, for it was only the subject that incarnated it in the midst of things that made it good or bad. The life of such individuality fades away in favor of the singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name, though he can be mistaken for no other. A singular essence, a life... (Deleuze, 2001, pp. 28–29)

What concerns us in this passage is Deleuze's evocative description of his concept of a life. We utilize this concept as a glue that ties the Foucauldian art of existence and the feminist ethics of care together.

The heart of Deleuze's concept is the distinction between "the life of the individual" on the one hand, and "the impersonal yet singular life" on the other hand. The life of the individual refers to all those things that make up an individual: habitual practices, characteristics, identities, and so on. The impersonal life refers rather to the ongoing event of being alive that precedes and makes possible such individual features. Despite the situation chosen for the above passage, a life is in "all the moments that a given living subject goes through" (Deleuze, 2001, p. 29). The practices and characteristics that define us as individuals inhabit an impersonal life that makes such practices possible. Deleuze's distinction is a variant of the bios/zoe pair, which has a long history. Bios has been understood to mean a form of (human) life (e.g., political life, *bios politikos*) whereas zoe has been used to refer to the bare fact of living. With the implied distinction between human and more-than-human life, this distinction has also become central to contemporary posthuman theorizations, and Deleuze's text is one key reference point for Braidotti's influential discussion of zoe (see 2006, pp. 37–42).

In our view, the distinction between impersonal life and the practices that individualize us is an alternative expression for the problem of freedom we discussed above. As an ongoing event, the impersonal life we inhabit remains open and undecided (Deleuze, 2001, p. 30). Consequently, in existential terms – that is, when looked at from the first-person point of view – we encounter (impersonal) life as a question. It may even be *the* question, as Albert Camus (2005) argued, in that our answers to other questions depend on our answer to this question. The undecidedness of our lives calls us to care about what to do with them. Notice the distance between Deleuze's vitalism and those where life is understood in terms of some invisible essence that inhabits living beings (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 55–56). A life is an ongoing event, not a genus.

The main point we wish to make with the notion of impersonal life is that it is both something we encounter in ourselves and something we encounter in others. Additionally, Deleuze's description of the Rogue shows that life needs care to continue. The Rogue *may* be coming back to life; those caring for him may be able to save him through their caring. Caring sustains life. Moreover, it is precisely the signs of life – be as it may that these signs are emitted in the face of the danger of dying – that inspire

respect, even love, in others. Impersonal life is an event we recognize both in ourselves and in others; this recognition inspires us to care for impersonal life in both.

Caring for a Life

So far, we have argued that the art of existence is a practice that encompasses one's whole life. It is a creative form of care of the self that aspires to lead a beautiful, i.e., non-destructive life. What is cared for and cared about is not a self as a type of object, but rather the impersonal event of living. Thus, care of the self is imbued with care for others in that it is directed towards the impersonal life we encounter in ourselves and in others.

Yet we have so far said very little about what we mean by care. A certain vagueness about what care as an activity actually means is, in our view, one of the shortcomings of the Foucauldian tradition, especially when it is understood as a type of self-cultivation. It is thus, with the elaboration of the concept of care in mind, that we bring the feminist ethics of care literature into a conversation with the Foucauldian art of existence.

The seminal definition of care within the feminist tradition was offered by Joan Tronto (Tronto, 1993). With Bernice Fisher, she suggested that care “includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair ‘our world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Tronto, 1993, p. 103). Following Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, see also Thompson 2022, p. 71), we understand this definition as encompassing more than human entanglements. Interdependence is a condition and prerequisite of life – a necessity, not a choice. In short, care is an activity that includes everything we do to sustain (impersonal) life. Notice that this definition supports the connection we made earlier between beautiful life and non-destructiveness. If the art of existence centers around care, and care is everything that we do to sustain life, then the art of existence promotes life.

Both Tronto and Puig de la Bellacasa emphasize that care is both an activity and an affective attitude (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 5; Tronto, 1993, p. 103). In other words, care is to be understood both as affectively caring about life and actively taking care of life. However, they also (Puig de la Bellacasa,

2017, p. 5; Tronto, 1993) add that care has an ethico-political dimension in addition to the practical and the affective. For the conscientious adult living in a society based on various ecologically destructive practices, taking up the practice of care is an act of rebellion or, in a more Foucauldian vocabulary, a form of counter-conduct (Munro, 2014). Turning towards the impersonal life in and around us, care becomes a multispecies, networked, and collaborative endeavor that takes place in more than human entanglements. Practices of self-cultivation are sometimes accused of being individualistic and therefore poorly suited to the challenges faced in the present. When care is understood in connection to the impersonal life that happens equally to the self and to others, these objections hardly hit their mark (Carstens, 2020, p. 80).

The third and final point we would like to introduce from feminist ethics of care is what Tronto (2017) calls the “ongoing cycle of care” (p. 32). Although Tronto's argument focuses on the human world, we feel that its internal logic can be read in a posthuman register as well. In our view, the main point of her argument is that acts of care create conditions that, in turn, foster future acts of care (Tronto, 2013). On the one hand, and drawing inspiration from Deleuze's description of the Rogue, we read this as a claim regarding the affective dimension of care: caring creates affects that inspire future acts of care. On the other hand, we read it as denoting a sort of multispecies economy of care that our lives are based on: caring for other forms of life helps sustain our lives, too. For example, flourishing bees pollinate plants that nourish us, and living trees produce oxygen that allows us to breathe (see also Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 146). Life happens in a relational, interdependent manner. As James Thompson (2022) puts it, “we are all constrained or enabled to different degrees by the care networks that shape our lives, and that we in turn shape” (p. 69). In other words, caring inspires caring.

Tronto's and Puig de la Bellacasa's work brings added detail regarding the practice of care to our account of the art of existence. In summary, care is both an activity and an affect that sustains the impersonal life we encounter in ourselves and in others. This is a suitable point to return to Smith's reading of Foucault. Smith introduces Agamben's notion of form-of-life (Smith, 2015, pp. 147–149) as an example of the Foucauldian art of existence. A form-of-life is “a life for which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself” (Smith, 2015, p. 147). Surprisingly, the examples Smith offers of this – primary among

them the philosopher whose entire life is a practice of philosophy – are examples where impersonal life (as the ongoing event of living) is entirely subjected to the requirements of a particular practice. If we were to follow Smith's examples, the art of existence would begin to resemble a managerial gesture where the wild and untamed impersonal life is subjected to a specific form. It seems to us that such a gesture would remain trapped in often-critiqued fantasies of human culture being able to conquer nature.

Instead of the problematic imagery of colonizing impersonal life, we rather suggest reversing the terms in Smith's examples: A form-of-life should be understood as a practice that takes life itself as its form. Or, to put this a bit differently, the acts and affects that constitute the practice of the art of existence should serve only whatever it is that caring for impersonal life requires of us. This trades on Haraway's remark that "caring means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity" (Haraway, cited in van Dooren, 2014). "Curiosity," we continue with Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), "and even love for the needs of an 'other,' whether this is the people we live with, the animals we care for, or the soil we plant in" (p. 147). The art of existence consists of precisely those acts and those affects that allow impersonal life to express itself in the richest possible way – both in ourselves and in others. It is a biophilic practice *par excellence*.

Gardening

As the final step in our argument, we would like to turn to gardening as a concrete example of the caring art of existence in the Anthropocene. In speaking of gardening, we rely heavily on the personal experience of one of the authors although gardening is also thematically present in the theoretical resources we have been drawing on (see Foucault, 1986; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Moreover, numerous studies (e.g. BIOS, 2019; Nordlund, 2014; O'Brien, 2010; Thompson, 2018) attest that there are therapeutic benefits to getting one's hands dirty with the effort of caring for those lives that inhabit one's backyard. With Deleuze, we see this as a result of the respect and love, even beatitude, that come to the fore once one starts to care for and about the impersonal life one shares with others.

In offering gardening as a concrete example of the art of existence, we are not neglecting the "tactical polyvalence" (Foucault, 1978, pp. 100–101) proper to most human practices. We only speak of

gardening as understood along the lines of care (e.g. Cotton, 2010; O'Brien, 2010) and make no claims that gardening is always like this in practice. As a practice of care, gardening focuses on supporting the lives of plants, soil, and often animals as well. At least occasionally this entails an obstinate resistance towards trends and other constructions of what a garden should be, which often have more to do with capitalist consumption than care. As Foucault (1986) attests, the garden is a heterotopia, a place where both hegemonic practices of a society and counter-conducts to those practices are present. Garden is thus a space where the political nature of caring for impersonal life in its various expressions becomes visible.

As a practice of care, gardening raises a conceptual point about how our approach reforms self-cultivation. Etymologically speaking, cultivation is rooted in the past participle of the Latin verb *colere* (cultus). Apart from the familiar meanings of forming or, in more concrete settings, tilling, *colere* also carried connotations of inhabiting, tending, and guarding. Peters (2022) argues that gardeners and farmers alike used it to describe deep respect for living things. We find these connotations more compelling than formation in so far as the art of existence is concerned. Certainly, a formation of sorts is part of the art of existence, especially if formation is understood as the shaping of lives that always takes place in encounters between them (Ingold, 2018; Mika, 2017). However, emphasizing the senses of inhabiting, tending, and guarding gives a unique tone to cultivation that escapes the potentials for violence that have been argued to be part of formation (see Morton, 2012).

Saying that gardening is a concrete example of care is an understatement; gardening is a cornucopia of sensual and material experiences. Life in the garden is pregnant with smells, colors, and shapes, all of which support the curiosity of the gardener. Take raspberry bushes as an example. When you kneel down to search for berries, an entire world opens up – a world where bees and wasps are the native inhabitants. Countless berries become visible, hidden within the foliage. Reaching out to pick one up, you smell its fragrant smell and touch its soft, furry surface. It is as if the event of life had become tangible enough to affect you through the five senses (see Hickey-Moody, 2016).

There is a kind of reciprocity in play here that concretizes the cyclic nature of care. The garden teaches you to change your perspective and directs you towards its expressions of life; yet it only does

so if you care about the garden. The garden only gives you this wonderful affective experience if you approach it with an attitude of caring about the life that inhabits it. Puig de la Bellacasa notes, when discussing permaculture, that “we are embedded in a web of complex relationships in which personal actions have consequences for more than ourselves and our kin” (2017, p. 146). This is to say that living beautifully requires us to recognize that what we do matters for others. “And, conversely”, continues Puig de la Bellacasa, “these collective connections transform ‘our’ personal life” (2017, p. 146; see also Hickey-Moody, 2016). If one approaches the garden with an attitude of nurturing it, the garden returns the favor.

This does not mean that there are no tensions and adversity in the garden – and by implication in our suggested caring art of existence. What do we do if a cherished salad crop disappears into the mouths of slugs? What if we find, in a garden inherited from our dear grandmother and therefore full of precious memories, invasive alien species that she brought back from her travels? How do we decide what to sacrifice and at the expense of the well-being of what? And can we indeed decide, or should we be more modest in perceiving our powers to affect what goes on in the garden? These tensions cannot be avoided. To the contrary, it is a crucial part of the caring art of existence to stay with the trouble as Haraway (2016) puts it – to be response-able even though there are no laws to follow, and tensions abound.

Spending time in the garden is also part of gardening. Remarkable things happen when you sit quietly in the garden for long enough: the small animals of the forest, such as birds and squirrels, come closer to you. They play, tease each other, snatch worms from the flowerbed you’ve just turned – to them you become part of the harmony of the garden – not a human being to be watched out for, but a human being who is a part of the community of those inhabiting the garden. Although this only happens when one sits down quietly in the garden, we cannot help but follow Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) in thinking that this communality is:

nurtured by hands on dirt, curiosity, and even love for the needs of an ‘other,’ whether this is the people we live with, the animals we care for, or the soil we plant in. It is by working with them, by feeding them and gathering their castings as food for plants, that a relationship is created that acknowledges these interdependencies. (p. 147)

Communality is, in short, nurtured by care.

Gardening therefore amounts to building a multi-species community or, as Ingold (2018) has aptly phrased it, a practice of *commoning*. Commoning is the coming into togetherness of those who share a life. That is to say, it is attending to the being-together of various lives (Ingold, 2018; see also Haraway, 2016). In contemporary discourse, community is easily confused with having a shared identity, with the result that being included in a community becomes a matter of being the same. To avoid this, we emphasize life’s event-nature. Sharing a life consists in being enveloped by the same event. To care for impersonal life within oneself is an event that also envelops those that one shares one’s life with; conversely, to care for impersonal life in others is an event that also envelops oneself.

Following Jean-Luc Nancy’s work on community (1991, p. 12-17), we thus argue that the community nurtured by caring takes place across a certain distance or exteriority. A suitable example of this exteriority is when someone close to us dies (cf. Nancy, 1991, p. 12-17). We learn that even this person, whom we knew better than most, had so many events in their life that we were not part of, so many relationships of whose existence we did not know, so many thoughts that we did not share. Impersonal life is a collection of singular events some of which envelop some individuals while others envelop other individuals.

The following specification of the relation between care and impersonal life is therefore necessary: The affective dimension of care is the same for impersonal life as expressed in oneself and as expressed in others; the concrete actions of caring are different depending on what is being cared for. Thus, to continue with the example of gardening, different means are required for supporting impersonal life as it is expressed in kale and for supporting impersonal life as it is expressed in the gardener. However, in both cases, the art of existence contains the two dimensions of caring: *care of* in the sense of looking after and *caring about* in the sense that what is cared for matters. In the Anthropocene, cultivating one’s ability to care in both senses is an existential and political act of the highest order; a form of critique that multiplies signs of life rather than judgements.

Conclusions

To summarize, following Foucault, we have argued that a caring art of existence responds to the question of how to live beautifully given the potentially destructive freedom we possess. The anchor for our concept of care is Deleuze's notion of impersonal life. We have suggested that care is a practice that turns towards impersonal life as the ongoing event of being alive. Following Tronto and Puig de la Bellacasa, this practice is both an affect and an activity, directed at *caring for* and *caring about* impersonal life. Upholding an attitude of care towards oneself helps to find the same attitude towards other living beings, and *vice versa*. For the conscientious adult living in the Anthropocene, committing to this practice is an act of resistance in that it shifts the very foundations of our society to a more sustainable ground.

Part of our suggestion is that this type of self-cultivation is better suited to the context of the Anthropocene than earlier conceptualizations. If the task of art education in our times is, as Kallio-Tavin suggests, to help us “become responsible toward other species in a world where subjection of other species is an everyday norm” (2020, p. 299), a caring art of existence is one way of practicing this orientation. It has not been our intention to claim that other conceptions of self-cultivation do not contain elements of care or multispecies entanglements. Rather, what we claim is that earlier conceptualizations have not made care the front and center of self-cultivation, and that we should do so, given the times that we live in. In line with this, a few more explicit words are in order about what care offers that other conceptualizations of self-cultivation do not.

Formulated in terms of care, self-cultivation becomes normatively anchored to a biophilic attitude towards all life on earth (Blom et al., 2020; Joey & De Block, 2011; Orr, 2004; Wilson, 1984). This is an improvement with respect to the anthropocentrism, which still plagues some formulations of transformative learning and *Bildung* (for a review, see Varpanen et al., 2022). Further, caring for the impersonal life we encounter in ourselves and in others carries the potential for attuning to those elements of environmental experience that cannot be consciously comprehended (Pohl, 2020; Saari & Mullen, 2023). This is a step towards addressing the unconscious or non-conscious aspects of experience often neglected in literature on self-cultivation (see Varpanen et al., 2022).

We have also sought to escape a problematic deadlock between self-determination and

other-determination often found in concepts of self-cultivation (Varpanen et al., 2022). When too much emphasis is placed on self-determination, we risk perpetuating the ecologically harmful image of a sovereign human subject who determines their place in the world with little regard for human or non-human others. When this image is given up in favor of other-determination, we face the risk of diluting the critical potential of self-cultivation in relation to ecologically problematic social structures. By taking impersonal life as the locus of the attitude of care, we avoid the first danger because impersonal life connects us with the other inhabitants of the Earth, and we avoid the second danger because not being a construction found in (human) society impersonal life maintains the distance necessary for critique.

The objection could be raised that in taking a *conscientious* adult as our protagonist, we have omitted what must be a key issue in many adult education contexts: the question of what inspires someone to begin pondering the ethical challenges we face. One point to make in response is that only the contingency of an encounter can engender an attitude of self-cultivation; we can never know in advance which encounter it is that “forces us to think” (Deleuze, 2015, p. 183). For those not satisfied with the contingency of existence, we would say that inquiring into how someone begins to practice an art of existence would require some understanding of what that art is like. We have perhaps only managed to say a few words about the latter, leaving inquiries into the former for future research.

Finally, it could be objected – as Badiou (2000) does against Deleuze – that the concept of a life is *ignorantiae asylum*. Have we not merely put up a suitably mysterious concept where we can always take refuge when inconvenient questions arise about the justifications of our argumentation? We would respond that, from the first-person point of view, life itself is something of an *ignorantiae asylum* in the sense that it is an unresolvable mystery that we nevertheless must engage in. Any conceptual representation would therefore need to include something of this mystery in order to be taken seriously. In assessing whether we have succeeded in finding a suitable balance between mystery and exactness we will have to leave ourselves in the safekeeping of our readers.

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