MARTIAL SPIRITUALITY AND THE ETHICS OF ATTENTION

Michael L. Raposa, Lehigh University

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Abstract: *While many martial arts include meditation as a part of their practice, some are regarded as being essentially spiritual exercises. Moreover, in a variety of religious traditions, certain forms of prayer and meditation are conceived as preparation for engagement in "spiritual combat." Most immediately, these practices are designed to enhance one's capacity to control attention, to defend it from forces that attempt to capture it. I argue in this essay that such a capacity is morally significant. Our behavior is most readily subject to ethical evaluation when it is deliberate behavior, that is, in instances when we are paying careful attention to what we are doing. Moreover, paying attention is itself a kind of doing, something that we can do poorly or well, or fail to do altogether. Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch made this last claim the centerpiece of their philosophy, the foundational insight that grounds an "ethics of attention." My goal in this essay is to explore the relationship between martial spirituality and an ethics of attention. Toward that end, philosophical pragmatists like William James and Charles Peirce will also prove to be important sources of insight.*

INTRODUCTION

"Martial spirituality" is the label that I use to designate certain martial arts that can be portrayed as spiritual exercises as well as certain traditional forms of prayer and meditation that are conceived as involving preparation for, or participation in, some kind of spiritual combat. These are essentially two ways of looking at the same thing—the martial as spiritual or the spiritual as martial in character. Martial spirituality is a complex phenomenon that can be manifested in a great variety of forms and analyzed from a diversity of perspectives.[1]

"Ethics of attention" is the designation for a nuanced moral perspective, rooted in the thought of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, but also shaped, in my account, by certain ideas woven into the fabric of classical American philosophical pragmatism. A fundamental ingredient of this perspective is the presumption that how we choose to pay attention is a morally significant decision, that attending in itself is a kind of *doing* and also presupposed by anything else that we choose to do deliberately. No discussion of ethics that aims to be comprehensive can succeed if it fails to consider acts of attention, as well as to account for how habits of attention are developed or eroded.[2]

The struggle for any individual's attention tends to be rather intense and ongoing. This claim is a general characterization of the nature of human life in a highly technological, information-saturated, politically contentious, late capitalist environment, such as the one in which many individuals presently exist. Success in capturing someone's attention can have enormous political

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and economic, as well as moral consequences. Resistance to such attempts takes the form of self-control, that is, the ability to control one's own acts of attention and to form certain desirable habits of attention. "Capture" and "resistance" are terms best suited to describe some form of combat—the kind of training that one needs in order to prevail in such a contest is one that resonates with the practices distinguishing various forms of martial spirituality.

One of the simplest but most useful definitions of meditation (despite its considerable vagueness) is that it is the practice of paying attention.[3] Such a definition supplies a direct link between the meditative disciplines that constitute a martial spirituality and the general project of an ethics of attention. To be sure, meditative exercises are not always or even typically portrayed as being martial in character. They might still be considered as ethically relevant, however, to the extent that becoming morally virtuous is not something that simply happens by accident but requires deliberate cultivation. In such cases, virtue consists in cultivated habits, including habits of attention developed in the practice of meditation. This more general view of the relationship between spirituality and morality is itself of considerable interest but it is not the primary topic of this essay. Here, my chief concern is with practices that are designed to enable success in the *competition* to control one's attention.

My earlier work on this topic was met with the occasional criticism that an emphasis on the martial character of spirituality represents something of a distortion.[4] Talk about "spiritual combat," while perhaps meaningful earlier on in the history of Christianity, can now be replaced by a discourse that emphasizes psychological concepts and categories. The portrayal of an interior battle with "evil spirits" should yield to a description of conflicting emotions and impulses, with the successful therapeutic resolution of such conflicts replacing the goal of achieving "victory" over someone or something that is conceived as transcending the self and threatening it.

This criticism is not without merit, but I reject the claim that all talk about a martial form of spirituality is outdated or meaningless. I continue to affirm with the American philosopher and psychologist William James that there is real "wrongness" in the world and that we have a duty to resist it.[5] The sense of what is "wrong" may manifest itself most clearly in the form of a conflict that unfolds on an interior landscape, within the human psyche. But this is not to suggest that the forces engaged in such a conflict must be framed in purely psychological terms. A person may struggle internally with thoughts or feelings that clearly have been shaped by relationships with external forces and factors. Racist feelings and attitudes, for example, are hardly *sui generis*; rather, racist individuals have typically been nurtured by racist communities and shaped by racist environments. This struggle can extend to acts of attention. While the volition that one exercises in order to pay attention may appear to be a psychological phenomenon, there are real forces external to the self—frequently guided by the intentions of specific individuals and institutions—that constitute significant sources of distraction.

The example of racism underscores the extent to which the ethical challenge of resisting troublesome attitudes or states of mind is closely linked to an epistemological challenge arising from the need to identify certain beliefs as false, as well as to expose specific behaviors or practices as problematic. Indeed, the latter challenge is in some respects the primary one, as any meaningful resistance presupposes critique, with some judgement about "wrongness" motivating the decision to cultivate fresh habits of attention and interpretation.[6]

ON THE VERY IDEA OF A SPIRITUAL COMBAT

As already indicated, the notion of engaging in spiritual combat might be regarded as antiquated by some persons and thus infelicitous for contemporary purposes. But the history of such an idea runs historically deep and cuts across a variety of religious traditions. In ancient Christianity (third through fifth centuries), the Desert Fathers understood their spiritual practice in precisely this fashion, as one constantly under the threat of forces of distraction, typically associated with Satan and personified as evil spirits. Chief among these was the "demon of noontide," who would most typically attack at midday, when the desert sun was at its hottest and fatigue was already setting in, but a considerable stretch of time separated the devotee from the comfort of sleep.[7] Understanding prayer and meditation as both preparation for and engagement in a kind of combat is an idea that has earlier biblical roots (especially in the Gospel portrayal of Jesus's own desert encounter with Satan, as well as in certain key passages from the letters of St. Paul) and then stretches forward throughout much of the history of Christianity. Within the Roman Catholic Church, it reached a certain peak of intensity in the sixteenth century during the Reformation period.[8] Yet, even in modernity, Christian theologians have continued to characterize the spiritual life as involving a "fight against spiritual enemies," with asceticism constituting not simply a form of penance but also a method of training for success in such combat.[9]

This idea is one that is hardly Christian in origin, nor is it by any means limited to that tradition. It has roots within Judaism that, if traced back into the ancient world, lead to Persian sources and the religion of Zoroastrianism.[10] Moving forward in history, it can be readily linked to Islamic discourse about *jihad* being the "sixth pillar" of Islam, here understood quite specifically and literally as referring to the struggle or exertion *within* the self that is required in order to resist evil. Enemies can be manifested outwardly, and the word jihad has been extended to include any kind of "holy war" in which Muslims might become engaged. But the primary struggle is enacted within the self, as in Christianity, taking the form of a spiritual combat.

Asian religious traditions are consistent with Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in exhorting devotees not to shrink from the spiritual conflict that confronts them. Within Hinduism, the martial character of one of its sacred texts, the *Bhagavad Gita,* can be readily discerned. The central narrative of this poem is organized around Lord Krishna's "pep talk" to Prince Arjuna, a nobleman and warrior who has become emotionally exhausted by the endless warfare in which he is engaged (with some of his own family members arrayed against him as the enemy). Krishna employs a variety of arguments in order to convince Arjuna that he should pick up his weapon and continue to fight. There is an appeal to his "duty" as a member of the warrior caste and the shame that he would bring on himself and his family if he demurs. Krishna also offers reassurance, in the form of a theological claim, that killing the enemy or being killed oneself cannot result in the destruction of the *atman*, the individual essence that is eternally linked to the ultimate reality of Brahman. At a critical point in his discourse, however, there is a remarkable shift away from the field of battle that Arjuna is being encouraged to reenter and the familiar enemies that await him there. Instead, it is his own desire and anger that are identified as the true enemy, with the crucial effort to overcome them being one that unfolds on an interior battleground. If he fails in the spiritual combat, Arjuna is warned, every other conflict will be lost.[11]

If one then turns to consider certain East Asian martial arts informed by Daoism and Buddhism, there is a similar emphasis on the primacy of the interior struggle over any conflict that might arise between individuals.[12] Two observations seem immediately relevant here. In the first place, it is not the case that external struggles are to be regarded as authentic while the meaning of interior combat is to be interpreted metaphorically. The latter is frighteningly real, with significant stakes attached to winning or losing; indeed, physical death pales in comparison to the kind of spiritual death—a loss of one's essential self—that might result from failure in the interior struggle. Moreover, these are not entirely separate forms of combat but in some sense are deeply connected. Strife occurs between individuals only because certain internal conflicts have not been effectively resolved. It follows logically from this observation that the key to controlling some opponent or enemy often consists primarily in a kind of self-control.

The development of such self-control is the principal desideratum for training in these martial arts. There are physical exercises designed for precisely this purpose and a variety of meditative exercises that are essential to such training. In certain martial arts, such as the Japanese arts of *aikido* and *kyudo* or the Chinese practice of *taijiquan*, the physical exercises are themselves conceived as having a spiritual dimension, so that these disciplines can accurately be portrayed as forms of "moving meditation." There is a certain mindfulness with which these exercises ideally ought to be performed, a level of awareness that is comparable to what might be achieved in sitting meditation. Even when sitting, the regulation of breath and posture are regarded as significant for the purposes of spiritual exercise. To an even greater extent, however, the human body becomes an instrument of attention for anyone engaged in the martial arts as a form of meditation.

This blurring of the distinction between "inner" and "outer" in the literature devoted to the discussion of martial forms of spirituality is noteworthy. One cannot hope to defeat an enemy who confronts one outwardly by either refusing or failing to pay attention. Indeed, paying the proper kind of attention is precisely what is required to succeed in dealing with such a threat. This cultivation of a certain inward capacity is required for behavior to be effective and for interaction with other persons to be productive and controlled. Once again, this is just to insist that paying attention is a form of *doing*, moreover, that it is something that can be done well or done poorly, also that one might fail to do it at all. Every other kind of deliberate behavior is grounded in such acts of attention—one cannot pretend to exercise genuine moral agency in instances where one acts without any awareness of what one is doing or what is occurring. This does not mean that one cannot be morally responsible for what occurs, on the assumption that one *ought* to have paid proper attention in that instance. But it is worth observing both that the ability to achieve the latter can be compromised by complicating factors and that such an ability is something that can be developed through practice.

VOLITION AS ATTENTION

Human morality is an exceedingly complex affair. One can be held as much morally responsible for what one fails to do as for what one consciously and deliberately does. To be sure, the decision *not* to act itself can be perfectly deliberate, a conscious act of will. But in other instances, failure is discerned only by means of an examination of what has occurred over a period of time. And often in such cases, one's inability to act in an appropriate fashion *now* is linked to choices that one has made in the past. Morally meaningful self-control is not always enacted in the moment or

on the spot. Often, it takes the form of a decision to cultivate those habits most likely to shape appropriate behavior in the future. Here, the correct response to a question about "who controls whom" in acts of self-control is that the present self exercises a gentle influence over future versions of itself by means of a process of habit formation. "Ought implies can," Kant insisted; nevertheless, I might be judged morally blameworthy for my inability to do something right now because I previously neglected the task of preparing myself for just such a situation.

This sort of analysis of the moral life extends to include decisions made about how one ought to pay attention, decisions that necessarily result over time in the cultivation of distinctive habits of attention. I am assuming that the question of volition must be involved at some point in such an analysis if it is to be considered morally meaningful. It would be difficult to form an ethical judgement about someone whose failure to act in the appropriate way involved *no conscious decision* made either in the past or at present. With regard to acts of attention, however, this kind of decision-making seems to be ongoing, albeit somewhat constrained. There is no such thing as total freedom in this regard, as if one's power of attention were like a flashlight that one simply chooses to shine first on this object and then on that one, with perfect agency and immunity from distractions. Nevertheless, at every given moment of our conscious lives, we are confronted with a choice about how we are going to pay attention, both with regard to the objects and the quality of our attention.

The perspective that I am defending here is one rooted in an insight developed by William James that the very essence of volition is attention.[13] This insight supplies the proper rationale for any ethics of attention both by underscoring the nature of attention as a volitional act and by grounding all other forms of deliberate behavior in such acts of attending. For James, human experience is given whatever meaning it has by the acts of selective attention in which any individual engages; otherwise, it remains a mass of inchoate and meaningless sensations.[14] These acts are deeply influenced by both external and internal factors. With regard to the former, although I might choose to direct my attention to this rather than that, perhaps even to something imagined or remembered, a variety of sense objects that are directly present to me on any given occasion will also compete to elicit my interest. I might choose to respond to such objects freely and with pleasure (as in admiring the face of a sleeping infant or looking up to watch the sun set) or treat them as annoying distractions (as when I try to eliminate the "pop-up" advertisements that appear spontaneously and continuously on my computer screen or to ignore an annoying sound as I am working). Internal factors can also be evaluated as very different in kind. The habits of attention that I have struggled to cultivate may produce great satisfaction in their exercise (think of a sommelier experiencing the aroma and taste of a splendid glass of wine). Yet, there are other dispositional tendencies, including but not limited to habits of attention, that I may judge to be harmful and so feel compelled to eliminate. (Consider as an example the work done in cognitive behavioral therapy to expose and neutralize certain habitual or "automatic" ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving.)

Simone Weil seemed to differ from James in her comments about attention, not in terms of her appraisal of its significance (for both thinkers, paying proper attention is of extraordinary importance in the moral life), but rather, in her sharp distinction between attention and volition. To be sure, James emphasizes the sort of attention that is "muscular" in its exercise, a deliberate choosing to focus on one thing rather than another. For Weil, attention is a much more passive

phenomenon, a suspension of one's own will in order to be fully exposed to and transformed by the object of one's contemplation. Indeed, on her account, all forms of prayer and contemplation are essentially disciplines of attention.

I have argued elsewhere that this contrast between Weil and James ought not to be too sharply drawn.[15] Attention manifests itself in a variety of forms and phases. There is a more selective and narrowly focused kind of attention that directs awareness to a single object while prescinding from all others. But there are also "softer" forms of attention that do not involve such a narrowing or focusing, consisting instead in a certain openness, a readiness to encounter whatever might appear in experience. This latter kind of attention is what Weil wanted to distinguish from volition, but Heidegger pointed out that there is a form of volition that is displayed in a "willing not to will," one that results in a "releasement toward things" (*Gelassenheit*).[16] James actually made a similar point in his discussion of religious experience when he contrasted "active" with "passive" types of conversion.[17] There can be a powerful element of *surrender* involved in certain experiences of conversion, taking less the form of a gradual building up of habits through deliberate actions than a self-transformation that results from the passive encounter with a higher power. (In either case, it is important to observe that James understood religious conversion as a type of habit change.)

For Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch (with Plato as their primary inspiration), an ethics of attention must be rooted in surrender, that is, a surrendering of attention to its object in disciplined acts of contemplation. From Weil's idiosyncratic, quasi-Catholic point of view, God is the primary focus of such attention. In Murdoch's post-Christian musings, there is a return to Plato's ancient ideal of the "Good" as the proper subject matter for contemplation. But for both philosophers, attending to anything at all has the potential to reveal its true nature as something that participates in and so signifies an ideal or ultimate reality. This potential is realized only to the extent that one engages in contemplation with an appropriate disinterestedness or selflessness.[18] For Weil, it involves a kind of "waiting." "Above all," she announces, "our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth that object that is to penetrate it."[19] Murdoch follows Weil closely here, "borrowing" from her the word "attention" in order "to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual object." Such a gaze is "the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent."[20]

A number of observations seem immediately relevant here. This species of attention, already identified by Weil as the essence of prayer, is also linked by both authors to their conception of love. This is not a selfish love fueled by desire, but rather, one empty and open, ready to encounter whatever is presented in the object of contemplation as its true nature. As James had already suggested, such encounters can be self-transformative for the person engaged in spiritual exercises. Following James more closely, I want to argue that the decision about how one directs attention from moment to moment is itself morally meaningful. But for Weil and Murdoch, the true mark of moral agency is less a matter of how one "chooses" to direct attention than it is a certain *quality* of attention that one habitually displays in its exercise. Indeed, Murdoch is explicit in her claim that Weil's emphasis on waiting and attention is a useful and contrasting alternative "to contemporary English ethics with its emphasis on act and choice." She continues, "We should pay attention to such a point that we no longer have the 'choice.'"[21] That is to say, we should love not what we choose but whatever we happen to find. Our choices can be distorted by ego, but our love

can be purified by a proper attentiveness. As numerous theologians representing a great variety of traditions have noted, such a love is the primary weapon in any spiritual warrior's arsenal.[22]

SELF AS SYMBOL

My intention is to combine those insights of Weil and Murdoch that ground an ethics of attention in acts of passive surrender to the object of contemplation with certain complementary insights drawn from the writings of philosophical pragmatists. It is important to begin by noting that giving one's full attention to another is in fact an act, something that we *do.* This is precisely why it ought to be regarded as morally significant. We can choose to do it or not to do it. And we can choose the amount of care that we invest in the act of attending. I might be daydreaming on and off while you are engaged in conversing with me, perhaps multitasking as I simultaneously check messages on my cell phone. Alternatively, I might give you my full, undistracted attention.

I have already noted that James emphasized the importance of a selective attention-as-volition in giving shape and meaning to human experience. Weil and Murdoch appear to reject this element of choice in their deliberations, focusing on the passive nature of attention as a kind of waiting, a form of readiness; this is what gives it its ethical significance, that is, a willingness to encounter and be transformed by the other, a loving attentiveness that is free of desire, unconstrained by personal bias or interest.[23] My argument here is that the difference between their position and James's is not as considerable as it might appear to be. The kind of "choices" that they suggest ought to be neutralized are ones that might be made within the contemplative process itself; Weil and Murdoch focus primarily on the issue of how one pays attention. Surely this is not to suggest that one no longer needs to make choices about what to give one's attention. As James points out, these choices are ongoing and continuous in the stream of human consciousness—and frequently contested.

James's friend and fellow pragmatist Charles Peirce supplied additional insights that might be useful for blending these two perspectives. Peirce is well known for having defended the remarkable claim that human beings—above and beyond the observed fact that they make sophisticated use of a variety of signs and symbols—are themselves living symbols.[24] This is an argument that Peirce articulated very early on in his philosophical career and continued to develop during the decades that followed. One feature of his argument that is of special relevance here is Peirce's assertion that the meaning of a self-as-symbol is determined by how it pays attention. The self "denotes," he suggested, whatever it is paying attention to "at the moment," and "connotes" whatever it "knows or feels" about the object of its attention.[25]

This reference to episodes of attention as they occur "at the moment" is potentially misleading. For Peirce, meaning is not something attached to a sign as a static property, but rather, emerges only gradually over time. To refer to a self-sign as "living" is precisely to underscore its essential nature as a process of semiosis, with one sign succeeding another in a continuous chain of meanings both given and deferred. Individual acts of attention are most significant for Peirce in terms of how they contribute to the formation of distinctive habits of attention. As with his friend James, and also consistent with the views of Weil and Murdoch, acts of contemplation necessarily result in a certain kind of self-transformation. For all of these thinkers, this transformation can best be described in terms of virtue or habit development. Peirce's semiotic theory provides a unique framework for this process, allowing us to understand it also as involving the growth of meaning.

What a person actually means is determined by how she or he pays attention, once again, with respect to both the chosen objects and the quality of attention.

Peirce, like James, explains how attention can take the form of selection, a narrowing of awareness so that it is occupied with a single object of concern, "prescinding" from whatever else might present itself for one's consideration.[26] Nevertheless, in his most extended treatment of a form of meditative thinking that he argued might yield religiously meaningful results—what Peirce called "musement"—a dialectical relationship is established between active and passive forms of attention.[27] Generally speaking, musement is a contemplative exercise of the sort that Weil and Murdoch prescribed. It begins when the muser is fully "awake," open, and receptive to whatever presents itself in human experience, manifested as something either external or internal ("about or within") to consciousness.[28] Even if it is characterized by a certain passivity, Peirce wanted carefully to distinguish it from any frame of mind that could be portrayed as "vacancy" or "dreaminess."[29] In sharp contrast to the latter, musement is a "lively exercise" of one's powers of observation and intellect, albeit one that is necessarily framed by a certain readiness for whatever might eventuate as one navigates the continuous stream of thought-signs. This makes it a free and playful practice for Peirce, with no rules set in advance for how the meditation should proceed.

Nevertheless, Peirce does observe that there is a certain line of thought in which the idea of God's reality is likely "sooner or later" to present itself. The logic of musement is best suited for the playful contemplation of attractive hypotheses; it does not require that one should refuse to choose or select such an idea, as it arises naturally, for extended consideration, as long as one remains free from desire or bias with regard to what should subsequently be revealed. It can be noted that Peirce predicted how the idea of God is likely to be perceived as supremely beautiful so that it invites such contemplation and becomes increasingly irresistible. This prediction is presented less as an argument than as an invitation to his readers to engage in the practice of musement in order to check his own results. In any event, there is a delicate balance that can be observed in this exercise, as Peirce portrayed it, between activity and passivity, between self-control and yielding to the object of contemplation. Like juggling or surfing or the playful practice of "pushing hands" in taijiquan, the skillful attention required for success in musement is one that enables an extraordinary responsiveness to whatever happens as the process unfolds. I want to stress here that among the habits-as-skills required for successful performance of each of these activities—including fine motor skills affecting balance, movement, and perception—is a certain distinctive habit of attention.

DISTRACTION AND RESISTANCE

William James's well-known 1910 essay "The Moral Equivalent of War" was published late in his career.[30] While the essay proved to be influential, for contemporary readers it can seem problematic, given its proposal that human beings should declare war on "nature" rather than each other. In a world where the global climate crisis may pose a greater threat to the future of humanity than global warfare, this recommendation is not one that many readers are likely to embrace with enthusiasm. To be fair, James was writing early in the twentieth century, and he was proposing that enlisting young people for service in the struggle to tame the forces of nature—through the development of projects in construction, agriculture, and industry—was surely preferable to the prospect of drafting them into military service for the purposes of interhuman warfare. James

observed that a number of human virtues can be cultivated in combat situations better than elsewhere, including courage, endurance, disinterestedness, and loyalty. What was needed, he explained, was the imagining of a form of combat that allowed for such virtue formation without the destructive consequences of war, that is, a "moral equivalent of war."

Twenty-first-century readers who are reluctant to follow James in declaring a war against nature may be pleased to learn that he made a very different proposal a decade earlier during his Gifford Lectures on religious experience, concerning how one might conceive of war's moral equivalent. In that instance, it was a spiritual combat to which he was referring, with the discipline of attention constituting an important mode of training for anyone engaged in such a conflict. On James's account, one of the benefits of confronting a dangerous enemy is the stimulus that such an encounter supplies for "awakening the higher ranges of men's spiritual energy."[31] That persons are typically only "half awake" is a human condition that James bemoaned as problematic. In his exploration of religious experience, he discovered "something heroic that will speak to men as war does, and yet will be compatible with their spiritual selves as war has proved itself to be incompatible."[32] This discovery was most closely tied to his examination of various forms of asceticism; while vulnerable to the temptations of excess and self-abuse, the "spiritual meaning" of asceticism consists in its symbolizing the belief that there is "an element of real wrongness in the world, which is neither to be ignored or evaded, but which must be squarely met and overcome by an appeal to the soul's heroic resources."[33] Chief among these resources for James is the vigorous exercise of human attention. Even a sick man can engage in "moral warfare" insofar as he is able to "willfully turn his attention away from his own future" and so "train himself to indifference."[34]

James's comments here weave together the central claims that I have tried to articulate in this article. Spiritual combat can also be conceived as a form of "moral warfare"; spiritual disciplines of various kinds (James emphasized Hindu yoga and Ignatius's exercises as two prominent examples) are to be understood also as being ethically significant. Since they are most essentially practices designed to enhance attention, they must be regarded as immediately relevant to developing the sort of moral habitus linked to an ethics of attention. That human beings are in their typical condition only "half awake" is a state of affairs that is both spiritually dangerous and morally problematic. Here, James's concern resonates with his friend Peirce's insistence on being fully awake as an initial precondition for properly engaging in musement.

One can fail in a number of ways to meet the moral obligations proposed by an ethics of attention. My love requires that I give full and complete attention to whatever I contemplate as beloved. Anything less is a moral failure, to be judged more or less harshly depending upon particular circumstances. Christian theologians have traditionally noted that illness or fatigue might be factors mitigating one's responsibility in cases where it is difficult to maintain proper attention. The moral emphasis is on what one habitually *tends* to do rather than on what occurs in a specific situation. This observation extends to cases where it is not a person's problematic physical condition, but the lively presence of objects competing for one's attention that makes concentration a challenge. What habits does one have to cultivate to deal effectively with such distractions? And what disciplines are best suited for the purpose of developing habits of that sort?

It should be noted that the quality of one's attention and the presence of enticing distractions are not unrelated phenomena. For the Christian Desert Fathers, the demon of noontide was closely

identified with *acedia*, a sinful condition in which the devotee loses all appetite for spiritual goods. The desert does not initially seem like an environment filled with potential distractions, but as one grows increasingly bored, the ability to maintain one's attention on some object of contemplation diminishes proportionally.[35] In such a state of mind, virtually anything is likely to threaten concentration. Here, once again, is a blurring of the internal/external distinction discussed earlier. The demon can attack a devotee from within, directly affecting the quality of attention, or from without, by creating a great variety of distractions. My attention to a text that I am reading will very likely be challenged by a sudden and loud noise just outside my room. But if I grow painfully bored, even the sound of a dripping faucet or the barely audible hum of fluorescent lights can prove to be a maddening disturbance, just as my awareness of a hitherto unnoticed crack on my ceiling might become a fascinating diversion.

Understood as a combat situation—that is, as the moral equivalent of war—the challenge to one's attention calls for acts and strategies of resistance. One can act on the spot, flexing one's volitional musculature in order to maintain concentration and eschew distractions. But the emphasis here has been on a type of self-control that is developed over time as a process of habit formation. Even the demonstrated ability to resist diversions as they arise in the moment might be linked to the cultivation of a certain habit of volition nurtured by spiritual exercise.

CONCLUSION

This article has presupposed that the assault on human attention has increased dramatically as we have moved toward and now into the twenty-first century. Political and economic forces competing for our attention have always existed, but the politics and economics associated with late Western capitalism represent an unprecedented state of affairs.[36] Moreover, it is undeniably true that such forces now have at their disposal powerful technological resources not previously available. While an ancient hermit monk would have needed to be prepared for an attack by the noontide demon, it was not a preparation that required readiness for what might be lurking behind the sudden vibration of a cell phone. Modern technology has multiplied exponentially the number of stimuli impinging on human awareness. Perhaps more significantly, our modern technological practices threaten to transform our habits of attention dramatically.

That our contemporary situation underscores the relevance of a martial spirituality is a conclusion that follows naturally from such observations. But the primary purpose of this essay has been to suggest that a spirituality of this type needs to be framed in explicitly ethical terms. Paying proper attention to other persons is something that we are morally obliged to do. Parents who ignore their children in favor of pursuing their careers, for example, are typically considered blameworthy. To be sure, specific circumstances may challenge our ability to meet such an obligation—as when a candid conversation between spouses is interrupted by a smoke alarm triggered in the basement of their home. Nevertheless, appropriate investment in the disciplines associated with a martial spirituality mitigates the effects of such challenging circumstances. In the long run, they help to inculcate in an individual the sorts of habits judged as morally praiseworthy. Being a "good listener" is probably not a condition to which one is genetically predisposed; it helps to have good listening behavior modeled by others, but becoming such a person is likely to require some practice.

The ethics of attention must be extended to include certain moral obligations that we have with respect to ourselves. Even Weil and Murdoch, who prescribed an ethical stance that involves surrendering one's ego to the beloved object of contemplation, do not deny that continuous practice is essential for achieving such selflessness. From Peirce's semiotic perspective, how I habitually pay attention will significantly determine what I come to *mean* as a living symbol. This is something for which I am responsible.[37] In reply to the criticism that talk about a "spiritual combat" is hyperbolic, metaphorical, or archaic, it needs to be pointed out that the stakes are in fact incredibly high. I can surrender my attention to the person present before me in this moment or surrender instead to one of the multiple forces attempting to capture my attention. Following the pragmatists more closely here, there is a real choice involved in such situations that I am morally obliged to make, and in an ongoing fashion. How I make that choice, among other things, can shape the meaning of my life; making it poorly can result in losing my life, at least in the sense of having someone else determine its meaning.

In addition to the moral obligations that extend to other persons and to ourselves, it is a central premise of the ethics of attention that we should attend to anything encountered in experience with some care in order to discern its true nature, whether it presents itself to us initially as painful or sweet, ugly or beautiful, as enemy or friend. Even something later judged to be a distraction must be properly discerned as such; sometimes what is greeted as a distraction turns out quickly (and morally speaking) to be the very thing with which we should now be concerned.

Such shifts in judgment are an indication that the practice of attention must involve a continuous process of critique if it is to be an ethically meaningful practice. Within the context of a martial spirituality, constant critical assessment of who or what constitutes the "enemy" should be regarded as especially salient. Sometimes my labeling of someone in this fashion is based on an observation of their demeanor and behavior. At other times, the label is provided *for* me, mediated to me by social forces and factors that can dramatically shape my interactions with other persons. In either case, the mindful exercise of attention can serve to undermine the hegemony of such a negative designation. One can learn to like, perhaps even to love, someone previously regarded with disdain or come to regard an enemy as a friend. It takes practice, to be sure, including the sort of discipline prescribed by Weil and Murdoch with their talk about loving surrender to the object of contemplation.

In his writings about the martial art of aikido, Morihei Ueshiba suggested that learning to love one's "enemies" is more than a simple matter of self-transformation. The epistemological shift in perceiving an "enemy" now as "friend" is one that the person with whom I am presently interacting may be less than blithe to make. At a certain level of expertise and virtuosity, Ueshiba proposed, the martial artist is able to move beyond the interpretation of some situation as hostile in order to supply a strong reinterpretation of that encounter, planting seeds of peace and gently leading the person engaged to consider reconciliation.[38] If the meaning of a self-as-symbol is determined by how it pays attention, achieving a certain quality of attention might be the key to embodying the sort of insight and growth in meaning that such a reinterpretation requires.

Deciding what should now concern us, what we should now be attending to, is a morally meaningful decision. In every given instance, however, making a proper decision requires the embodiment of critical awareness. It requires that we be fully awake. We can move blithely past the poverty on our streets, be deaf to the call for distributive justice, fail to recognize oppression,

ignore the suffering of our neighbors, be blind to the cruelty of bigotry and bias, and remain insensitive to the ecologically destructive consequences of our behavior—all examples of "real wrongness" in the world—if we are in a moral slumber or only half awake. But being in such a condition is not itself ethically neutral. We have a responsibility to become a different sort of person, fully attentive and capable of discernment, also capable of resistance.

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NOTES

[1] For my earlier attempts to confront and partially tame this complexity, consider Raposa, "Martial Arts as Embodied Semiosis"; Raposa, "Martial Spirituality and the Logic of Pragmatism"; and Raposa, *Meditation and the Martial Arts*.
[2] For a general overview of the ethics of attention, especially as articulated in the writings of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, consult Panizza, *Ethics of Attention*.
[3] This is the definition of meditation, for example, presented and explicated by the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. See, especially, Nhat Hanh, *Miracle of Mindfulness*.
[4] This criticism has been most typically formulated from a specifically feminist perspective. For reasons that I identify here, I defend the use of talk about "spiritual combat" and "martial spirituality." But by no means do I think that such talk provides the only meaningful framework for developing an ethics of attention. Indeed, if the emphasis is placed on relationships that are not readily portrayed as involving a contest for attention, then other perspectives—such as an "ethics of care" of the sort developed by Carol Gilligan (*In a Different Voice*)—might prove to be much more useful for the purpose of exploring the moral dimension of how we pay attention.
[5] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 362.
[6] The bulk of my analysis here is devoted to the ethical challenge, but I offer a few comments in my conclusion about how the practice of attention can also be an exercise in critical thinking.
[7] Kuhns, *Demon of Noontide*, 39–64.
[8] Two key examples of this preoccupation with a martial form of spirituality during the Catholic Counter-Reformation are provided by Ignatius of Loyola (*Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*) and Lorenzo Scupoli (*Spiritual Combat: and a Treatise on Peace of Soul*). But the necessity of a combat engaging forces threatening to undermine spiritual practice is also acknowledged in the writings of women from this period, for example, Teresa of Avila in her treatise *The Way of Perfection*, especially chapters 38–40.
[9] Tanquerey, *Spiritual Life*, 101–119.
[10] My brief discussion of the Zoroastrian roots of Jewish and Christian thought appears in Raposa, *Meditation and the Martial Arts*, 92–93.
[11] *Bhagavad-Gita*, 108.
[12] Raposa, *Meditation and the Martial Arts*, chaps. 1 and 2. For a fascinating and comprehensive study of the role played by women in the cultivation of certain Daoist practices, including meditation and the internal martial arts, consult Despeux and Kohn, *Women in Daoism*.
[13] James, *Principles of Psychology*, 447.
[14] James, *Principles of Psychology*, 488.
[15] Raposa, *Theosemiotic*, 100.
[16] See Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*.
[17] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*.
[18] Panizza supplies an insightful interpretation of Weil and Murdoch on this topic. See Panizza, *Ethics of Attention*, chaps. 2 and 3.
[19] Weil, *Waiting for God*, 62.
[20] Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 327.
[21] Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 159.
[22] In addition to theologians, Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of *aikido*, provided a similar perspective on the "power of love" (Ueshiba, *Art of Peace*, 8).
[23] Weil turned to the *Bhagavad Gita* as one of the sources of her own perspective on acting without desire. For her comments about the necessity of acting without desire or concern for the fruits of action, consider Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 39, 117, 160.
[24] I offer an extended account of Peirce's theory of the self-as-symbol in Raposa, *Theosemiotic*, chap. 2.
[25] Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 7.591. References to Peirce's *Collected Papers* here follow the convention among Peirce scholars of using the volume and paragraph numbers; thus "7.591" should be read as "volume 7, paragraph 591."
[26] Raposa, "Martial Arts as Embodied Semiosis," 100.

[27] This treatment of musement appears in Peirce's 1908 article on "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God" (Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 6.452–491).
[28] Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 6.461.
[29] Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 6.458.
[30] James, "Moral Equivalent of War."
[31] James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 328.
[32] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 367.
[33] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 362.
[34] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 45–46.
[35] I have treated the phenomenon of boredom and its religious significance at considerable length elsewhere (Raposa, *Boredom and the Religious Imagination*).
[36] For an argument of just this sort, consult Mosurinjohn, *Spiritual Significance of Overload Boredom*.
[37] Although the personal responsibility is only partial, because the self's meaning will also be shaped both by those objects that happen to be available for its contemplation and by the attention paid to it by others (Raposa, *Theosemiotic*, 68–74).
[38] See Raposa, "Martial Arts as Embodied Semiosis," 141.