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MOVEMENTS THAT MATTER: HOW MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES CAN REFRAME THE ETHICS OF FIRST- BLUSH EMPATHY

ABSTRACT

If empathy is how bodies resonate with one another, and ethics is what we are meant to do with that resonance, consideration of the ethics of empathy must begin with the split-second, non-conscious responses between bodies: first-blush empathy. By combining the expertise of academics and practitioners of bodily knowledge, martial arts studies can distinctively consider how to cultivate the most ethical responses to others. This disciplinary argument takes physical form through a reading of a practice from Shotokan karate-do that opposes hyper-attention to self or other with cultivated non-attention. To unpack these principles, the essay then uses philosophy of mind to illustrate how *attention* provides a more compelling description of this initial bodily response to other bodies than *intention*. To most ethically engage others without imposing our own knowledge or self-absorption, we should cultivate deliberate habits of receptivity around first-blush empathy.

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KEYWORDS

Empathy; phenomenology; ethics; moral philosophy; philosophy of mind; practice

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In a viral video that made the news rounds a few years ago, a family lounges in their living room, watching television. The father is stretched out across a couch, asleep, with a young child also sleeping on his chest. The mother sits on the couch beside him with other children, including a baby. Suddenly, the baby sits forward, and their too-heavy head pulls them tumbling off the couch toward the coffee table and the floor. Almost before the father awakens, his arm shoots out as if of its own accord and catches the baby with one hand.¹

This is a high-stakes version of the phenomenon we have all likely experienced when what seems like inattention produces action faster than intentionality: you open the refrigerator and catch the falling ketchup bottle before you even register it, snatch the toothpaste out of the air when it drops from the medicine cabinet. Probably all practitioners of combat sports experience moments in martial arts practice when our bodies move with what feels like a prescient, almost choreographed response that feels, at least, pre- or non-conscious. In fact, practitioners may even aim to cultivate this state, whether they call it reflex, *mu* (no-mind), or fight IQ (intelligent, expert navigation of a ring and one's opponent).

Knowing what these neurological processes *are* does not get us any closer to understanding what having an embodied mind that appears to act of its own accord actually feels like. This essay argues that what it *feels like* to have pre- or non-conscious, embodied responses to other bodies is crucial to think about empathy and the ethics of empathy. This may seem unintuitive: I have set the stage for a discussion on reflexive, split-second engagement, which likely does not sound like how we think of or experience empathy. But part of empathy is how bodies receive, respond to, and reflect or otherwise react to one another's embodied feelings – what I will call how bodies *resonate* with one another. Ethics explores what we are meant to do with other people's bodies and feelings, how we should respond or react to that resonance; and so, a consideration of the ethics of empathy must begin with that split-second, non-conscious responses between bodies. I am talking about what I call 'first-blush empathy': the collision of bodies that precedes much of what we think of as ethics. Before a doctor can ask 'how should I respond to a patient's pain?' they must account for how their body recoils from or moves in toward that pain. To consider 'what is the ethical response to a stranger's cries for help?' we must account for how our bodies resonate with that stranger before our minds even process them. These embodied responses happen before cognition and reflection, and set the stage for how we think, feel, and act afterward; they are, in short, the foundation for ethics. To think and feel about ethics, and to act ethically, requires that we understand conceptually – and scientifically, though that is beyond the scope of this paper and my expertise – what happens in our bodies before analysis of traditional ethical questions. We must

begin with these embodied states if we are ever to understand those later stages of response.

If bodily first-responses are central to how we understand ethics, martial arts studies can distinctively consider how to cultivate the most ethical responses to others. This essay considers the relationship between language and embodiment in martial arts studies to argue for martial arts studies' distinctive insight into the cultivation of bodily habits. By combining the expertise of academics and practitioners of bodily knowledge, martial arts studies readily engages both analytically and experientially with what it means to have a body that collides with other bodies. I then turn to how this matters for ethics, particularly if we think about empathy as a virtue cultivated in our bodily habits. This principle takes physical form through a phenomenological reading of a practice from Shotokan karate-do instructor Rick Hotton that opposes hyper-attention to self or other with a kind of cultivated non-attention. Philosophy of mind from Leibniz, John Searle, and Ned Block illustrate how *attention* provides a more compelling description of this initial bodily response to other bodies than *intention* offers – which is to say that our perception of the world includes but overflows logic and consciousness. And finally, I argue that to most ethically engage others without imposing our own knowledge or self-absorption, we should cultivate deliberate habits of receptivity around first-blush empathy.

MAKING MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES MATTER

This essay is invested not only in considering first-blush empathy, but in arguing that martial arts studies as a disciplinary approach offers a distinctive avenue into questions like this one: questions about how bodies respond to one another, and how we cultivate habits of bodily interaction. 'Embodiment' refers to a host of different and often conflicting concepts and experiences in martial arts studies, and in philosophy generally. In this essay, I draw together scholars from sometimes disagreeing disciplines and philosophical schools to build a network of meanings around the term, often against the grain of their own understanding of embodiment. My project is not exegetical; that is, I am unconcerned with what these thinkers 'originally meant', if such a thing were possible to know. In fact, the conflict is productive, since embodiment and being embodied might feel very differently from person to person, or even from moment to moment. Scepticism of our tendency to confuse metaphor for materiality renders all these theories equally compelling attempts to describe what it means to be embodied: to have a physical, physiological self that sometimes feels as though it acts without or before the illusion of our rational selves (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, pp. 3–6). By embodiment, in this essay, I mean in part Varela et al's sense of 'the body as a lived, experiential structure and ... the context or

1 There is a chance that the father sees the baby falling; it is somewhat difficult to tell from the angle of the camera. Regardless, his response time is too fast for there to be a coherent train from visual stimulus to conscious processing, to decision making, to action. There are studies that show some ganglions in the retina operate through 'a direct pathway from the [lateral geniculate nucleus of the thalamus], specifically from the koniocellular neurons to MT (middle temporal area)' (Ajina & Bridge, 2017, p. 530). However, simply knowing which parts of the brain activate tell us little about consciousness, and even less about ethics (Blackmore, 2005, p. 32).

milieu of cognitive mechanisms' to speak to both neuroethics and cognitive science (Varela et al lxii). Given my focus on preconscious responses that move through and between bodies without representation or cognition, however, I retain some of the language of scepticism around 'representation' and what they call 'cognitive realism' (pp. 137–138). In short, while the mind is always bound up in its embodiment, because this essay explores the realm of habit and resonance, 'embodiment' here also refers to the lived experience of not always knowing, representing, or understanding why we move or how we move, of cognitively stumbling behind materiality in an endeavour to make sense of it – or not to make sense of it at all, as I will argue.

Martial arts studies is distinctively situated to think about the complexity of embodiment in first-blush empathy. Paul Bowman has compellingly argued against defining martial arts studies before we have better developed the theory around it, if at all (Bowman, 2019, pp. 54–55; see also Bowman 2015; Bowman 2017a); as Bowman and Judkins acknowledge, 'we already know that martial arts studies can emerge parasitically, and exist as a kind of supplement, sub-field, or focus within other umbrella disciplines and departments' (Bowman & Judkins, 2017, p. 4). This essay endeavours against that tendency. I am fully capable of writing an article about empathy and embodiment without recourse to martial arts, or one that uses martial arts as a metaphor or thought experiment to support my moral philosophical arguments. But my aim here is to contend that the theoretical potentials of martial arts studies generate new and different arguments: the integration of personal practice and academic reflection; the rigorous self-reflection on body-knowledge alongside the deliberate refinement of those body knowledges for purposes unrelated to academic study (Leigh & Bailey, 2013); two bodies engaged in intentional receptivity to one another's states and misdirection about those states; the opportunity to engage with experts who have dedicated a lifetime of study to a practice outside of formal academics.

This last claim is a bit more contentious. Sixt Wetzler's argument against mere adaptation of the terms and ideas from martial arts is invaluable and crucial to maintain the academic validity of the field. Wetzler cautions that martial arts studies should not confuse the research question of the field as "how the qi flows", but rather, "how certain practitioners of internal Chinese martial arts believe [and how they came to believe] the qi flows" (Wetzler, 2015, p. 23). To rephrase Wetzler in a philosophical context (rather than in the context of cultural studies or *Kulturwissenschaften*): we should not confuse the language and concepts of martial artists as making apodictic claims, but should understand them as culturally-situated, interpretive paradigms of bodily phenomena.

As with any attempt to communicate via publication, our studies will necessarily be constrained by language. If philosophy wants to address embodiment, it obviously needs philosophers of the body,

and those philosophers should recognize the linguistic frames they use as culturally mediated (something philosophers tend not to do, in general). As Paul Bowman has argued, academics (or anyone) cannot simply step outside of language as our primary form of meaning-making (Bowman, 2018, p. 13). Whether on the *tatami* as a karate teacher or in the lecture hall as a philosophy professor, I have felt the frustration of the requisite recourse to language to somehow convey the feeling of 'that thing', a 'perhaps ultimately impossible or forever unsatisfying effort of translation' (Bowman, 2018, p. 8).² Philosophers, too, could reframe Loic Wacquant (2009) to say 'the bodily anchoring of the practical knowledge constitutive of pugilism' – and of empathy – 'requires indeed a complete overhaul of our way of writing [philosophy]' (p. 122). Even in my own work against metaphorizing the body, I myself am guilty of sometimes idealizing 'the body' as somehow pure and complete in-and-of-itself, even when I argue that language is a mode of embodiment.

But, rather than reiterate the dichotomy between embodiment and signification/interpretation, my aim here is to suggest that when we describe what it means to inhabit 'embodiment of a martial art, we might well look to the language of the martial arts experts as they describe what their own experience of embodiment. Much like ordinary-language philosophy, cultural studies, literary studies, and other fields have poached the terms of their research subjects, so too might martial arts studies make use of the theoretical frameworks of expert, non-academic practitioners. This is because, as I have argued elsewhere, in addition to seeing language as a means of communicating rational data, 'language is a physiological process that draws bodies together through feeling' (Katz, 2022, p. 2). It may be difficult or impossible ever to use words to evoke in my karate students' bodies precisely the same phenomenological experience I have in my body when we execute the same technique – but language is the best way we have to *try*. Rather than create new terms and descriptive frameworks for how these relations between bodies express themselves, we would do well to turn our always-critical academic eyes to the metaphors and illustrations that experts already use.

To make these moves might involve some autoethnography as scholars describe their own embodied experiences; Daniel Mroz's recent work on *Tàolù* is a notable example of this practice (Mroz, 2020). The uniquely expert knowledge of an academic who is also an emerging expert in the practice they study presents the possibility of massive blind spots and tangled tautology, but it also offers a theoretical practice distinct to only a few fields similar to martial arts studies. Kimerer LaMothe, a dancer and religious studies scholar, intertwines dance and religion to make theoretical moves within an autoethnographic schema. Her arguments about translate well into our field; martial arts:

2 At the risk of simply critiquing, Cynarski's 'The philosophy of martial arts' (2017) and their earlier 'Humanistic Theory of Martial Arts' (Cynarski & Skowron, 2014) exemplifies the frustrating circularity of what it means to philosophise embodiment through semantic interpretation, as promises of considering embodiment land on either rather traditional semiotic interpretation or vague gestures toward abstractions like 'soul'.
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1. 'create and become patterns of sensation and response' that help us to feel and articulate how 'the movements we make make us' in ways unique to the practitioner-academic (LaMothe, 2015, p. 4)
2. encourage practice 'in ways that *cultivate a sensory awareness* of our participation in it', such that our self-reflections are not merely intellectual but also embodied (5)

And, for the subset of martial arts studies invested in philosophy of embodiment, practices like dance or martial arts:

3. clarify how '[m]atter exists as a variation of movement' (22), rather than 'something that happens to matter or something that matter does in response to another material thing' (18)

This is something like phenomenology: what does it feel like to embody an element of martial arts practice – or to embody empathy (Telles, 2022; see also Allen-Collinson, 2009 & Telles, Vaittinen, & Barreira, 2018)? It is something like a *habitus*: what are the accreted modalities of embodiment, language, and culture that produce what Lauren Miller calls 'underlying emotional orientation toward the world' cultivated through a practice like martial arts or empathy (Miller, 2023, p. 67)? It calls on something like body-intelligence: how do bodies 'know' what it means to empathize, especially when they seem to do so on their own (Andrieu, 2017)? How do we learn and cultivate these habits in our bodies (Bailey & Pickard, 2010)? With questions like these as academic interlocutors, martial arts scholars can engage with the concepts of experts in embodiment – their teachers, fellow practitioners, and their own experiences – not as object-language but as metalanguage (Wetzler, 2015).

And so, while this essay aims to explore the philosophy of empathy through a martial arts practice, its goal is neither to use martial arts as mere metaphor, nor to suggest that a particular teacher's version of a particular technique from Shotokan karate somehow illuminates an apodictic truth about the universe. Rather, it aims to explore the familiar question of how empathy works and feels through the distinct lens of *martial arts studies*: a field that can help make movement and bodies matter.

EMPATHY, SYMPATHY, VIRTUE

'Empathy' is one of those terms that shifts and morphs depending on who uses it and for what aim. It became an academic and popular buzzword around the 2010s, with everyone from United States President Barack Obama making a case for empathy as the grounds for citizenship, to Dutch primatologist Frans de Waal declaring that we had entered an 'age of empathy' more connected to our caring bonobo ancestry than the violence of chimps. Empathy was political, psychological, ethical, biological, evolutionary, and everything in between (Stueber, 2010).

Part of the problem with defining empathy's scope lies within the work of eighteenth-century philosophers David Hume and Adam

Smith, who saw sympathy as either a cognitive (Smith) or an embodied (Hume) operation – and Hume is notorious for using wildly differing definitions of sympathy even in his own work. This often manifests as a contrast between 'empathy' and 'sympathy', for, though both men in fact named their subject 'sympathy', some scholars have opted to use "empathy" to describe Hume's embodied relations between bodies (Katz, 2022; see also Pinch, 1996 & Taylor, 2015). But the practice of these two modalities of sympathy vary significantly: where sympathy for Smith connotes a rational process by which one imagines what the other might feel by mentally placing oneself in a similar, hypothetical situation, Hume 'sympathy' often emerges pre-consciously, between bodies, as a sort of contagion. If we want to consider what happens in the pre-conscious emergence of empathy, we must set Smith aside – which unsettles any idea of a rational, decision-making 'I' at the helm of bodily responses (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, pp. 3–6).

For my purposes here, temporality matters: there simply is not enough time between the baby or the ketchup falling and the catch, between the shoulder twitch and the punch, for a rational mind to process the input, represent the situation consciously, decide on an action, and intend for that response to occur. Smith's sympathy occurs over time upon observation and reflection; Hume's occurs immediately at the level of resonance. For Smith, any resonance between bodies must of necessity begin with observation and speculation. This is an effect of sensory limitation: because our senses 'never did and never can carry us beyond our own persons', we therefore 'have no immediate experience of what other men feel' (Smith, 1759, p. 2). Faced with this solipsistic limitation, Smith then offers a most compelling claim: through imagination, 'we enter as it were into his body and become in some measure him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them' (p. 2–3). Smith's conclusions are cautious and heavily equivocated: we only enter 'as it were' and become the other person 'in some measure', which allows us to form 'some idea' that gives feelings 'weaker in degree' and ultimately 'not altogether unlike' the sensations of the other. These qualifiers demonstrate how Smith's work in 1759 aims to correct the enthusiasm of Hume's 1739 treatise with empirical, scientific disinterest. In fact, if we remove the equivocation from Smith's claim, he begins to sound much more like Hume: 'we enter into the other's body and become them, form their sensations, and feel them'. This distinction will be central later in the discussions of both Searle and Cavell. In short, for now, conscious reasoning is key: our cognitive analysis and subsequent deductions enable us to form ideas of others' interiority.

Temporality makes 'empathy' a more accurate term to describe the connection between bodies that Hume posits. Rather than conscious reflection within a single mind, Hume's sympathy happens non-consciously *between* bodies through something like emotional contagion. He writes that:

the minds of men are mirrors to one another, not only because they reflect each others' emotions, but also because

those rays of passions, sentiments and opinions may be often reverberated, and may decay away by insensible degrees. (Hume, 1739, p. 365)

Resonance between bodily ‘affections pass from one person to another’, until one’s body ‘forms such a lively idea of the [other’s] passions, as is presently converted into the passion itself’ (576). This is why he can argue that ‘the passions are . . . contagious’ (603), for they do not only seem to pass between people, but actually transmit from body to body. This is the central point for my argument: unlike Smith’s model of sympathy in which the feeling arises from the mind of the observer alone, Hume suggests that feelings leap from body to body.³ This empathy is ultimately epigenetic; it emanates from the relationship between two bodies. Importantly for the next section on Searle, rather than telling us something about the thing itself, cause and effect are known only through these relationships (75). In other words, we know only how our bodies collide with other bodies.

My intention here is not to settle a three-hundred-year-old debate, but rather, to argue that at least the beginning of empathy – what I am calling ‘first-blush’ empathy – happens before any processing, representation, and decision-making. Provided there is time, all of those elements happen afterward, to be sure; but, I contend, first-blush empathy inflects bodily response into all of those subsequent processes.

One way to conceptualise the relationship between bodily response and cognitive response is to simply include both in a more structured version of sympathy/empathy. Modern psychology and physiology separate these kinds of relationships between minds and bodies into *perspective-taking* and *empathy*. Each of these has two further sub-categories:

1. Perspective Taking is comprised of
 - 1.1. Cognitive perspective-taking: the ability to infer the thoughts or beliefs of someone else.
 - 1.2. Affective perspective-taking: the ability to infer the emotions or feelings of someone else
2. Empathy is comprised of
 - 2.1. Cognitive empathy: as the ability to model the emotional states of others (to understand their feelings)
 - 2.2. Affective empathy: experience-sharing and affect-sharing; ‘the automatic and primitive process by which observation of emotions in one agent triggers isomorphic emotions in a second agent’ (Healey & Grossman, 2018)

Perspective-taking seems to derive from Smith, in which one infers the thoughts and sensations of other bodies. ‘Cognitive empathy’ seems to straddle both Smith and Hume. And ‘affective

empathy’ sounds a good deal like Humean emotional contagion – but its emphasis on *observation of emotions* does not wholly account for Hume’s sense of feelings as relational, embodied epiphenomena. As Tatiana Holway argues convincingly, the emphasis on sight as the sense that drives sympathy is distinctly Smithean (Holway, 1992; see also Greiner, 2009, p. 296; 2012, p. 16); building on Holway, my own work highlights how the relationship between sight and knowledge of others fails to account for the embodied complexity of empathy (Katz, 2022, 60n3; 2023).

Recent studies have proposed a third mode of empathy that better accounts for these phenomena: somatic empathy (Shamay-Tsoory 2011; Raine et al., 2022). This describes the way that bodies, not minds, might respond to one another and resonate without mere reliance on observation. Somatic empathy, according to these studies, offers a basis for empathy (Iacoboni, 2009), perhaps by beginning in motor function (Lamm & Majdandzic, 2015), and then leading to affective and then cognitive empathy (Van der Graaff et al., 2016). Rather than simply take these conclusions as fact – we would do well to believe in the power of science as an interpretive framework of objective phenomena, but also to remember that it remains an interpretive framework – I would point to the ghosts of Smith and Hume haunting these models in the way that psychology asks the question about how we respond to others. Within this framework lies a rift, a jump between body and mind, that preserves the rational self even when the data disavows it.

Most importantly, Smith and Hume were not *merely* describing psychological phenomena; they aimed to produce moral philosophy and to articulate the ethical implications of these phenomena. The longer time-frame of Smith’s sympathy and its dependence on observation do not explain the first-blush encounter between bodies that I argue lies at the core of ethical interactions. It cannot help us to understand how the baby-saving father’s body responds to his toppling child – nor, more crucially, can it explain why we can walk into a room and immediately feel if people were fighting, or were more intimate than they want us to know, or how we can feel if our partner is sad or angry without even looking at them. In these moments, whether in fighting or feeling, ‘the body is in action before consciousness is aware of it’ (Andrieu, 2017, p. 23; see also Andrieu, 2016 & Massumi, 2002, p. 23-25).⁴ We cannot adequately consider what it means for the body to act before consciousness through a model that requires reflection.

And it is here, in the collision between ethics and movement, that studies of empathy intersect with martial arts studies. Phenomenology, particularly articulated by Merleau-Ponty, understands ‘self’ as embodied and relational; the assemblage of

3 It would be unfair to Hume (and Smith) to pretend that Hume did not have tendencies toward the same solipsism that colours Smith’s sympathy, for Hume writes that ‘when we sympathise with the passions and sentiments of others, these movements appear first in *our* minds as mere ideas, and are conceiv’d to belong to another person’ (Hume, 1739, p. 319). This is why Hume’s use of the word ‘sympathy’ is so very slippery, for this definition seems contradictory to the version I claimed above for contagious feeling or for empathy.

4 <<Le corps est en acte ... avant que la conscience en soit consciente>>

the body manifests as movement, for '[t]here is not first a perception followed by a movement, the perception and the movement form a system that is modified as a whole' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 113). Through this model of movement, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of embodiment and sympathy is quite confident about the ability of a body to communicate with another body through relationality:

If I am capable of feeling by a sort of interlocking of the body proper and the sensible, I am capable also of seeing and recognizing other bodies and other [people]. The schema of the body proper, since I am able to see myself, can be shared by all other bodies'. (Merleau-Ponty, 1970, p. 129)

His model resonates perhaps too strongly with Smithean sympathy: it depends on 'seeing', on replacing another body with your own. Martial arts studies offers a distinct way to understand the body as movement and movement as a shared lexicon, one which escapes the gravity of sight and resists overconfidence in the isomorphism of one embodied experience from another. D. A. Farrer posits as a practice vital to the academic study of martial arts, a 'somatic extension of participant observation where the body may become both subject and object of research' (Farrer, 2018, p. 137, 138; see also Farrer & Whalen-Bridge, 2011, p. 7). Through the merging of academic knowledge and expert practice, martial arts studies can access 'the experiential immediacy required by a cultural phenomenology grounded in embodiment is, as it were, closer to the surface and more apparently accessible to study' (Csordas, 1999, p. 148). When we want to explore the psychology and philosophy of what it feels like to be embodied, we should use our bodies to do so. Attending to the physical experience of movement helps us to consider where our philosophical interpretations may be influenced by eighteenth-century models of sympathy, particularly by escaping the tendency to rely on imagination as a stand-in for living bodies.

Most vitally, martial arts studies helps us think about practice and habit cultivation: how we can cultivate the most ethical first-blush empathy in our bodies. Rather than think about this through education or learning theories, I contend that the cultivation of first-blush responses belong to the epistemology of ethics; that is, ethics is particularly equipped to think about the way that we inculcate moral orientations toward others' bodies. These are all terms central to the moral philosophy of virtue, which sees right action as longitudinal articulations of character (*habit*), embodied, and deliberately incorporated into our habits (*cultivated*) through *practices* that we learn in communal traditions (MacIntyre, 2007). Virtue ethics and martial arts studies synergise well, for they are both invested in the ways that our bodies respond to other bodies. Virtue ethics sees these responses as central to what it means to be human (*telos* or *aims*): to attend to vulnerability and interdependence. While a defence of virtue ethics extends well beyond the scope of this essay, I take as a basis for my ethical arguments that if virtue is sound, then an appropriate consideration of virtue ethics is how our bodies respond to other bodies before conscious choice appears to have caught up, and that to attend to vulnerability and dependence requires *receptivity* over

the imposition of our own knowledge or goals. In short, somatic empathy may be where virtue begins.

IRIMI, WANT-TO, TREPIDATION

To explore how martial arts studies might help us to better understand something like somatic empathy, I turn to a thought experiment that I will call *Irimi*: a technique for entering into an opponent's attack as articulated by Hotton. My aim here is that unforgivingly elusive endeavour to make martial arts studies *matter*, as in, material: to borrow imagery and language from an expert in embodiment to convey the physical, embodied affects at hand.

In a 2014 video on his channel *Shotokan Karate*, Rick Hotton discusses the technique *irimi*, or 'entering' into an opponent's attack. As the partner steps forward with a traditional karate *oi-zuki* (a thrusting punch), you step in to meet their body, not their punch, while framing with your front arm. Importantly, this is not a block; the goal is a sort of unification of the two bodies into one blended organism through movement. This makes the practice particularly useful to study the body as movement. *Irimi* is about becoming movement, about creating moving assemblages in space. Again, this is not to say that *Irimi* is metaphoric or apodictic, but an opportunity to think about how martial arts studies can most clearly explore what it would feel like to be a body-as-movement in relation with other movements.

To that end, I suggest we look at expert practitioners' language about these movements as they transmit their embodied experiences. In the example of Hotton-sensei's *irimi*, he gives two extremes to avoid: 'want-to' or 'angst' on the one hand, and what he calls 'trepidation' or 'anxiety' on the other. These form disparate ends of a spectrum of hyperattention on self and other. After a brief attempt at embodied description here, I will argue that these two extremes illuminate questions of ontology and epistemology: of the nature of reality, and how we know about it.

In 'want-to', the practitioner focuses too much on their own aims. Anticipation causes them to lean too far forward, often to tighten or raise the trapezius muscles and the shoulders, to reach their hands out too far in front of them. The tension may counterintuitively produce a lag in response caused either by an upward jumping motion as they spring in to meet the attack, or by a stuttering intention that starts and stops in an attempt to predict when the attack will come. Often their eyes move away from the kind of soft, unfocused gaze for which a karate-ka aims (*tsuki no kokoro* (月の心), or 'mind like the moon'), and instead hyperfixate on the incoming arm or the target for their frame, whether it is the arm or the face. Frequently, 'want-to' produces rigid form and a general lack of awareness about how one's technique should adjust to conform to the new assemblage between attacker and defender; one may fail to account for height or width differences between partners. Practitioners of any art will recognize want-to from bouts or practices when they committed too much to a 'game plan' at the expense of adaptation, or simply to really wanting to land a particular strike, throw, or submission. Want-to, Hotton

says, comes from excessive concern with one's own intentions and plans.



Figure 1. Hotton miming 'want-to' for his students.

In 'trepidation', the practitioner focuses too much on their partner's incoming attack. Anticipation causes them to recoil, to shift their weight back from their front foot, to draw the elbows too far inward for protection, and like 'want-to', to tighten or raise the trapezius muscles and the shoulders. The tension often results in a lag, where the practitioner responds too late to the incoming strike, or a disconnect, where the practitioner moves too far away from the strike and loses the blend. Again, their eyes lose soft focus, and instead avert entirely or hyperfixate on the incoming arm. Practitioners of any art will recognize trepidation from bouts or practices where they were concerned about their opponent's speed, size, strength, or skill, or even simply knowing that the opponent is known for a particular technique and over-responding to that threat only to meet another. Trepidation, Hotton says, comes from excessive concern with what the opponent will do – that is, with the interpretation of what the opponent will do.



Figure 2. Hotton miming 'trepidation' for his students.

As a martial arts practice, *irimi* aims toward the cultivation of the pre-conscious, baby-catching kind of reflex in the context of a fight or self-defence. At the speed of advanced sparring or in self-defence, the practitioner can neither be too concerned with their own plan, nor with the direct knowledge of their opponent's actions. Martial arts researchers and sports researchers in general

are familiar with the idea, with how '[c]ertain movements become automatic reflexes that seem able to reveal the body's intentionality; the body appears to realize these movements unconsciously as *incorporated gestures become automatic*' (Da Nobrega et al., 2017, p. 61). *Irimi* seems to be something like an 'encroachment of the moving body upon a space that occurs through a mutual precession of perception and movement', and an attempt to minimize the time between perception and that movement (Saint-Albert, 2016, p. 67, quoted in and translated by Da Nobrega).

But this description fails to capture the central philosophical question of how these bodily habits reach the state where they appear to be purely body-knowledge. 'Habit', the obvious answer, is also merely description, a nominalization that transforms a verb into a noun and calls it sufficient. The stakes of how a body response becomes habitual is not merely a curiosity for martial training. In ethical terms, we should care very much about where our bodies *begin*.

Imagine, for example, that I walk into a room and encounter my friend in a state of extreme emotional agitation. My body might respond with trepidation, recoiling from the intensity or valence of that affect as it travels in the style of Humean emotional contagion. My muscles may tense up; I may find myself shifting my body away from theirs even in the moment of perception; my brain might release epinephrine, triggering flight or freeze responses. Alternately, I might respond with want-to, with similar muscle tensions, with an anticipation that directs my body toward affects that endeavour to solve the problem before I even know what it is, or that may even lash out with fight responses at perceived enemies – including my friend, depending on how my body tends to react to high-valence emotions. The contagion metaphor has its limits, in that their feelings here engender responsive feelings in my own body that may not match theirs; their anger does not necessarily make me angry. But how my body *feels* their anger and then responds with its own feelings happens *as if* their emotion is simply in the air, in impressions that vibrate through the ether, as Hume might say (Brennan, 2004, p. 9).

And here is the rub: even if these first-blush body responses are not where I end up in the moments after the initial perception, they will continue to send ripples through the assemblage between us. I may consciously tell myself that I am not in danger, but my muscles may still remain engaged, fight/flight/freeze responses still active. Moreover, my friend's body will perceive my bodily response and react in kind: perhaps my trepidation augments their agitation, and they lash out with want-to, and we end up in a recursive cycle where our affects have become their own motivation system (Tomkins, 1962, p. 171). There is a difference between feeling and acting, but my actions will be in part dictated by the embodied assemblage of my first-blush feelings.

At the same time, martial artists' reflexes are not 'natural', but learned; often, natural responses are counterintuitively less helpful

than the learned responses.⁵ Martial arts studies, therefore, is particularly well-situated to examine the core ontological and epistemological questions around how bodies react preconsciously to one another. In short: *what* (ontology) do bodies 'know' about each other, and *how* (epistemology)?

PERCEPTION, INTENTION, ATTENTION

To consider these first-blush reactions ethically important, we must determine what they are reactions *about*. In other words, while a surface level response to *Irimi* is that the technique responds to a punch, that analysis lacks philosophical rigour: is a punch a physical reality? a perception? an intention? an affect state?

If we are to consider what *bodies* know and do through martial arts practice, then we would do well to explore the question from a materialist philosophy that acknowledges the physicality of bodies. More directly, this essay dispenses with the notion of subjective idealism *a la* Hegel, Kant, and Leibniz: the argument that 'human awareness not only properly begins from within the mind, rather than from without, but that our knowledge of an "external world consisting of matter" is subservient to and dependent upon the activities of the mind' (Mijuskovic, 2023, p. 100).⁶ In this context, the mind of the practitioner cannot really know anything other than that it perceives a perception of an incoming punch. It does not know the intentions of its opponent – and in extreme versions of this argument, the mind of the practitioner does not even know if the opponent is in fact punching or even really exists. As Leibniz puts it, minds 'have no windows, through which anything could come in or go out' (1898, p. 219); they are self-contained monads, such that all perception and action 'can *only* spontaneously begin from within' (Mijuskovic, 2023, p. 104; Leibniz, 1898, p. 223). This tradition gives us the 'brain in a vat' line of inquiry: perhaps the perception of the punch is merely happening in a disembodied mind somewhere. Pure, subjective idealism has a wide impact on analytic philosophy in that we continue to ask questions about minds and perception. To the horror of Leibniz, one would imagine, its descendants include reductively empirical modern cognitive psychologists who argue that psychological experience reduces to chemical and electric changes in the brain; from this perspective, everything is just within the mind, whether that mind is noumenal or data on an fMRI.

But if our line of inquiry concerns how physical bodies respond to one another, it seems necessary that those bodies have some physical interaction with one another. On the complete opposite end of subjective idealism, direct realists contend that perception is not perception of perception, but rather of the physical, external

attributes of objects around us. The practitioner takes in direct data on the incoming punch: the speed and acceleration, the size of the fist, its position in space. That data is empirically real, even if our perception of it might not accurately represent the empirical reality. Whether or not a mind exists to perceive the punch, the punch exists.

Given that objects have their own ontology (that is, their own relation to reality proper) in realism, then each of us as thinking subjects must formulate a relationship to those objects and to reality. Direct realism requires an explanation of how we exert our will into the world to change it, and how it responds to change us. John Searle's version of this relationship is *intentionalism*, which is to say that as we perceive reality, we create intentions about how we want to interact with it. Even if we strike someone with seeming spontaneity and say in hindsight, 'I just hit him,' Searle argues, we have intentions.

All intentional actions have intentions in action but not all intentional actions have prior intentions. I can do something intentionally without having formed a prior intention to do it, and I can have a prior intention to do something and yet not act on that intention. (Searle, 1980, p. 53)

I perceive facts about the world (there is a face) and formulate intentions even if I am consciously unaware of them (I will punch it).

It is easy to confuse intention for consciousness. Surely, it feels as though we do things without having any intention of doing them whatsoever, through drives unconscious or reflexive. But Searle would respond that to act is to intend, and specifically to intend about that particular action *even if I am completely unaware of it*. In Searle's example of raising an arm, he notes that it is insufficient simply to think that I intend to raise my arm; my nervous system intends to raise my arm in this particular fashion, which is why it happens that way and not any other way. If I did not intend it to raise in that way, it would not. Searle is also sceptical of any formulation of the unconscious. He acknowledges that 'there are plenty of *unconscious* thoughts', but contends that 'even if unconscious they still have to be thoughts' (Searle, 1991, p. 53). The logical content of intention is overriding: 'the phenomenal properties of ... sensations and feelings [of an experience] are not what matters; rather what matters are the logical properties of the experience' (Searle, 1980, p. 56). That is to say, even if an action appears to be happen all by itself ('I just hit him'), there is nevertheless an underlying and overriding intention that drives that action, be it a prior intention ('I intend to confront him, and to resort to violence if necessary'), or even just the mechanisms by which our bodies seem to act unconsciously; my arm would not

5 For more on this, try jiu-jitsu.

6 The debate between idealism and materialism – let alone the different degrees and kinds within the two – far exceeds the scope of this essay. For more on the author's Spinozist, new-materialist stance, see Katz (2022).

have 'just hit him' had not the thought 'I intend to strike him with my arm' arisen with the intention to execute that intention.

Martial arts studies has something to offer this conversation through its unique approach to physical interaction and the systemic and individual, conscious and unconscious, purposeful and epiphenomenal forces that circulate around fighting. At the risk of being glib: anyone who has been punched in the face enough knows rather intuitively at least that I am not just a brain in a vat, that the body feels and responds all of its own volition; and anyone who has practised raising their arm in a particular way in a *kata* for thirty years only to have their arm seem to betray them yet once again and 'raise itself' differently from the intention knows that intention does not tell the whole story. In *Irimi*, the subjective idealist might argue that my body simply responds to its own perceptions of an other, and to its perceptions of itself; the direct realist might argue that even if it feels as though we move together, that movement only occurs because of my perception and direct intention to move that way in response to the stimulus. Neither of these feels quite like it captures the lived experience of martial arts practice.

Idealists and realists would unite to argue that philosophy does not care what the experience of having a mind feels like; they care what it is actually like. While I have argued that the model of perception, representation, and intentional decision-making does not describe what it feels like to be embodied, it is quite difficult to explain logically *why* it feels wrong. If we simply throw up our hands and say that we cannot really *know* anything about anything, ethics becomes very difficult. But, if ethics should attend to the feelings around first-blush empathy, it will require a turn to phenomenology, as martial arts studies frequently has in the work of Telles, Mroz, and others. But that simply dodges the philosophical question of what things are actually like unless we can logically prove that perception is 1) of external objects and 2) derived from a source other than logic and intention that is nevertheless the most sound way to understand the world around us. Bodies are that source.

For martial arts studies, I argue, the best response to the critique of idealism and realism comes from Ned Block's 'mental paint'. Block considers optical illusion, when we simultaneously see something not as it is, and also *know* it is not objectively that way, but cannot process it any other way. Attention matters, here. When we fight, we may reach a state where we perceive that time slows down, or everything except our opponent is blurry (Block, 2010, p. 44). This is, of course, not objectively true: time has not slowed down, and the people around us have not somehow lost some of their molecular structural integrity. And we know this even as it appears to be true, for, 'the change invoked by changing attention does not look like a change in the world' (Block, 2003, p. 53); in other words, we know that the people around us are not blurry. We've all I suspect had the experience of fighting someone who hit us 'out of nowhere' – but we also know that is untrue.

Illusion has its own particular quality, and that quality suggests that we do not actually perceive reality as a set of facts.

Illusion reveals that perception is not merely about itself; our minds do not represent the world to us, and then we respond to that representation. If I fake and then punch to throw off your timing, I offer what El-Java Abdul Qadir, a Shotokan practitioner and national point-fighting champion, calls 'a true expression of a false intent'. Your mind, conscious and unconscious, may perceive that expression accurately, that is to say you properly perceive the (false) intention, and therefore: you get punched. More compellingly, you could (mis)read the fake and *still* block or dodge the attack. This is the falling baby or the ketchup bottle with an illusionary twist: martial arts readily demonstrate that *sometimes our minds misperceive reality, but our bodies more soundly respond to reality despite our misperception*. The representational content, as Block puts it, is 'vague,' but the phenomenology is clear: our bodies felt an attack and responded as if by themselves.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT, REFLEX, PRACTICE

How we understand perception really matters when we turn to ethics, because both the way we think we perceive others and the degree to which we believe we understand others will inform how we interact with them. In an ethical context, subjective idealism might become so concerned with the notion that we cannot actually perceive one another that it produces a kind of trepidation, a bodily withdrawing into the self borne of a paradoxical fear that we cannot know the other. Similarly, direct realism may become so concerned with its own intentions that it produces a kind of want-to that overrides the possibility that we misperceive others' feelings and experiences. And even Block's emphasis on phenomenological attention might lead us to become so focused on the perception of our perceptions that we fail to directly engage with others' – correlative, perhaps, with becoming so disoriented by our opponent's fakes and footwork that we end up tripping over our own (mis)readings.

If attention is the problem, then a fully embodied phenomenology more aligned with Humean empathy might suggest that *non-attention* is the most ethical approach. This is not to say 'inattention', which would be simply not paying attention at all; but rather, the soft-gaze, unfocused-but-alert feeling of *Irimi* might be the best affect for first-blush empathy in that it opens space for bodies to respond to bodies without the interference of trepidation, want-to, or illusion. To consider how one might cultivate an ethics of non-attention, Stanley Cavell's *acknowledgement* offers a basis on which martial arts studies can build.

Purely relying on rational knowledge is a dead-end that must either end in a naive realism or equally naive scepticism that produces idealism or nihilism. Smithean sympathy, with its emphasis on sight, perception, and conscious reflection, engenders both anxiety about what I cannot perceive, and at the

same time an injunction to represent and read as best I can. Instead, we should hold higher regard for acknowledgement. When I see you take a punch, or mourn, or fear, do I truly know that you are hurt? Do I know your pain? Rather than fall into the trepidation or want-to of knowledge, we might instead acknowledge others when they say they feel pain. I cannot argue without a doubt that I know what you feel, but I do believe you feel pain (Scarry, 1985, p. 7). And moreover, acknowledgement compels me to act: “[a]cknowledgement goes beyond knowledge ... in its requirement that I do something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge’ (Cavell, 2003, p. 257).⁷ It does not need to know, or to impose intention, nor does it struggle with the anxiety of trepidation and the limits of perception. Instead, it is openness to the world, a phenomenology that produces the phenomena of feeling like my body runs ahead of itself.

The thought experiment of *Irimi* cultivates an intentional non-attention more aligned with acknowledgement than with knowledge. The practitioner does not need to know what their opponent will do; in fact, if they focus too heavily on what they know will happen, then they will fall into trepidation. They also do not even need to know what they will do, or they risk want-to. And they do not need to worry about ‘reading’ their opponent, or they may fall for illusion and respond not to a body but to their own (mis)perception. Acknowledgement, then, begins with bodily receptivity, with non-attention that allows for the formulation of assemblages rather than focusing on intentional aims.

If acknowledgement is a bodily practice, then martial arts studies offers a distinct methodology to consider how one might cultivate that practice even and especially because it happens before consciousness emerges. First-blush empathy and its associated virtues might be ‘actions of a mechanical, physical or physico-chemical order’, or what Marcel Mauss calls ‘techniques of the body’ (p. 75–76). In this case, they could be cultivated like martial arts reflexes. I quote at-length from Mroz, who brilliantly articulates how martial arts practice cultivates embodied habits:

To respond competently to violence, I must reject my instinctual or preferred reactions in favour of responses that help me neutralize my aggressor using my environment. ... [,] externalize my decision-making process to respond to my partner’s actions and timing ... [and] abandon my self-involvement and conform my body to pre-existing ritualized shapes and sequences ... using a durational training that, over time, changes how I perceive my body. (Mroz, 2020, p. 8)

There are several crucial arguments in this paragraph. Martial arts training is about interrogating initial intentions, and stepping outside of an individual sense of self to become part of the collective drama, as Hotton calls it, of the biological, physiological, and psychological assemblage created between two bodies. Over

time, as Mroz writes, this rewrites habitual responses. Rather than ‘chang[e] how I perceive my body’, however, I contend that this practice alters how our bodies engage with other bodies; it has less to do with perception and individual bodies, and more to do with resonance and relationships. In the terms of this essay, Mroz’s argument suggests that intentional, ritualised practice can reshape our relationship with our bodies so that our responses *feel* ‘externali[sed]’ and at times different to what might have once been ‘instinctual or preferred reactions’.

What martial arts studies teaches us about cultivating bodily habits gives us tools to better understand how we might alter our first-blush empathetic responses. It is common to oppose intention and the unconscious, but martial arts is filled with:

Certain movements [that] become automatic reflexes that seem able to reveal the body’s intentionality; the body appears to realize these movements unconsciously as *incorporated gestures become automatic*. (Da Nobrega et al., 2017, p. 61)

Imagine a physician whose first-blush embodied response to a particular kind of body is disgust: they may shift their weight back, draw their head away, bring their arms closer to their stomach, and so forth. Even if their conscious mind intervenes as quickly as it can to bring them back toward neutrality at the very least, that physical response will colour the entire interaction with that patient for the rest of that engagement – especially because the patient’s body may ‘read’ that response even if the patient is never consciously aware of it. If body-knowledge is permanently barred from conscious knowledge, or if consciousness and intentionality are overriding or all that really drives us, then this physician can only ever hope to train their conscious response. But martial arts studies helps us to think about the ways that the physician might well incorporate (literally) other gestures and affects through habitual practice.

Martial arts studies offers a distinctive lens on what bodies can do, what they can know, and the way they attain that knowledge. If we consider ethical refinement through the lenses that martial arts studies offers, doing and becoming *good* entails not simply thinking hard, or reading more, but *doing*. It begins at the level of bodies, and becomes reflexive not from sheer desire to make it so, but from the cultivation of affective habit through bodily practice.

7 This reading of Cavell is a bit against-the-grain of his commitments to realism. The idea of acknowledgement I put forward here begins with Cavell, but I have admittedly taken it in a different direction than may have meant.

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