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From the Feminist Ethic of Care to Tender Attunement: Olga Tokarczuk's Tenderness as a New Ethical and Aesthetic Imperative

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Abstract: In her Nobel speech in 2019, Olga Tokarczuk presented the category of tenderness as a new way of narrating the contemporary world. This article is a proposal for the analysis and interpretation of tenderness in ethical and aesthetic terms. (1) From an ethical perspective, tenderness is interpreted as an extension and complement of feminist relational ethics, i.e., the ethics of care. In the proposed approach, tenderness is a broader and more universal quality than care in the feminist understanding. This article opens with a brief discussion of feminist interventions in ethics, with particular emphasis on the ethics of care. Next, the differences between care and tenderness are enumerated and described, in order to show how tenderness can serve as an extension and complement of the feminist ethic of care. These considerations are guided by the question of why tenderness is a better—more appropriate and more responsive to contemporary challenges—moral guidepost than care. (2) From the aesthetic perspective, tenderness is the negation of a contemplative, distanced, impersonal, and rational view of reality. As an aesthetic imperative, tenderness implies engaged experience of the beauty of reality in all of its manifestations. Therefore, in the last part of the article, existential tender attunement is described in aesthetic terms, as a position serving to sensitize others to the beauty and complexity of the post-anthropocentric world.

Keywords: tenderness; feminist ethics; ethics of care; existential attunement; aesthetics; Olga Tokarczuk

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1. Introduction

The tender narrator (Polish: *czuły narrator*)—the figure proposed by Olga Tokarczuk in her Nobel lecture—forms part of the important current trend of humanistic considerations of the theme of the modern human condition, a human being's place in the world and relationship with other beings. Within the framework of the ongoing debate, questions are considered concerning a human being's relationship with the world and relations with nonhuman beings, the responsibilities of the individual and the species, and the status of nonhuman beings and their connections with the human world. These issues lie at the intersection of many different threads and perspectives whose exploration reveals new cognitive horizons.

I propose to define and characterize tenderness (Polish: *czułość*) in ethical and aesthetic terms. Tenderness, as commonly understood, is associated with emotionality and affection. It calls to mind the idea of relating to other beings with care, engagement, and devotion. I will begin my reflections on tenderness by referring to an existing ethical theory based on care. The feminist ethics of care—for this is what we are discussing—will first be briefly characterized, in order to show how tenderness can extend and complement it. The considerations are guided by the question of why tenderness is a better—more appropriate and more responsive to contemporary challenges—moral guidepost than care. In order to answer this question, I will present and describe the differences

between tenderness and care as understood by feminist researchers. In the last part of the article, tenderness will also be interpreted aesthetically, as a kind of existential attunement that sensitizes others to the beauty of the post-anthropocentric world, beauty which is complex and less than obvious. In the interpretation I propose here, ethical and aesthetic experiences of the world merge and essentially complement one another. It is worth noting that the ethics of care, or more broadly feminist ethics, is just one of the contemporary ethical theories, alternative to traditional ethics. Currently, there are many currents of ethics that go beyond the traditional framework of humanistic ethics focused on the concepts of rationalism, objectivism, and universalism. These include, for example, environmental ethics, animal ethics, eco ethics, or postcolonial ethics. A juxtaposition of tenderness with the main notions and concepts of these currents would certainly provide a more nuanced and critical perspective on this category. In this article, however, I focus solely on the feminist ethics of care in order to show the differences between care and tenderness, understood as ethical (and also aesthetic) categories. My choice is also dictated by the synonymy of the both terms, which, however—thanks to the analyzes carried out—turns out to be less significant than it might seem.

2. Feminist Interventions in Ethics

The emergence of feminist ethics dates back to the 1970s, when articles considering the ethical aspects of the relationship between feminism and sexism began to appear in academic literature (see Korsmeyer 1973; Rosenthal 1973; Jaggar 1974; Young 1977). Intuitions concerning moral issues in reference to women had been expressed previously, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, by authors such as Mary Astell (Astell [1694] 2002) and Mary Wollstonecraft (Wollstonecraft [1792] 1988); however, we owe the full development of feminist ethics as a systematic trend in feminist research to American researchers working in the second half of the twentieth century (Berges 2015).

Feminist ethics assumes the existence of specifically female experiences, which have been overlooked in traditional ethical discourse. The goal of ethics in feminist terms is to discover and criticize the ways in which gender influences moral convictions and practices, reveals itself, and modifies ethical theories. In other words, feminist ethics tends to undermine binary thinking about gender (which results in inequalities of, e.g., a social, cultural, political, or economic nature), thus eliminating the historically shaped privileges of the male gender in the field of morality, as well as the abolition of the oppressive social order in terms of gender, sexuality, and gender identity: “If feminism is about gender, and gender is the name for a social system that distributes power unequally between men and women, then you’d expect feminist ethicists to try to understand, criticize, and correct how gender operates within our moral beliefs and practices. And they do just that (Lindemann 2005, p. 11).”

Contemporary feminist approaches to ethics differ in terms of methodology and specific goals; nevertheless, it is possible to indicate a common feature, i.e., the criticism of the Kantian belief in the derivation of ethics solely from the requirements of reason (Lindemann 2005, pp. 67–72). Feminist researchers reject the position that morality is the domain of reason and has nothing to do with the sphere of feelings and emotions. Belief in the rational origin of human morality is connected with the ideal of universality, at which—in the traditional approach—human intellectual activity should aim. Ethics derived from rationality are supposed to supply universal values and lead to the formulation of universal moral judgments (see Kant [1788] 1956; Fisher 2000; Kant 2001; Chan and Markie 2002; Skorupski 2010). Traditional ethical theories are thus bound and conditioned by the ideals of rationality and universality. This logocentric and universalist approach is opposed by feminist ethicists, who argue, first, that traditional ethical theories are not inherently universal, as they concern only a small group of white, free, privileged men—demonstrating “a sleepy inattentiveness to women’s concerns (Tong 1993, p. 160)”; and second, that ethics is not a universal theory, as it is always entangled in political, social, and cultural circumstances (see Card 1991; Held 1993; Held 1995b; Clement 1996). As

Robin Dillon observes, feminist ethics “identifies problems for character in contexts of domination and subordination and proposes ways of addressing those problems, and it identifies problems of unreflective theory and proposes power-conscious alternatives (Dillon 2017, p. 381).”

Another aspect related to traditional ethical theories, as pointed out by feminist researchers, is the restriction of the logocentric and universalist approach to ethics to the public sphere, which signifies the exclusion from the domain of morality of what—according to second-wave feminists—is referred to as the private sphere; that is, family relationships, raising children, and housework:

The public sphere is the one in which people’s freedom is secured by rights [...] the private sphere is the sphere of the good. [...] the private sphere is the one in which relationships and the responsibilities that arise from them are frequently unchosen. It is the place for favoritism because it is the sphere of friendship, love, and families—relationships in which another person is singled out for special consideration rather than treated the same as everybody else. The private sphere is particularistic rather than universal; it is quirky, unsystematic, and personal. (Lindemann 2005, pp. 76–77)

The division into the public and private spheres, which is commonly made and essential to a certain type of ethics, leads as well to a particular approach to the subject of morality. In traditional ethical theories, this subject was exclusively a man, usually white, free, and well-to-do. Traditional ethical theories, as feminist scholars state, are strongly individualistic, exclusivist, and limited to one gender’s perspective (Friedman 1995, pp. 61–78).

In addition to the critical dimension, feminist interventions in traditional ethics have led to the advancement of positive moral postulates and the formulation of new ethical theories (Jaggar 1991, pp. 78–106). The impetus for their creation was the conviction that women should create a theory of morality that would take into account and assign a positive value to characteristics and aspects associated with their gender (Moody-Adams 1991, pp. 195–212). This belief is based on essentialist and binary thinking about gender, which is not the dominant approach at present in the humanities and social sciences. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, when the first feminist formulations of moral theory were created, including the ethics of care, this approach was commonly acknowledged and adopted (see Jaggar 1974; Daly 1979; Frye 1983; Card 1986). At that time, most female researchers agreed on the existence of specifically feminine values, virtues, and traits that should be verbalized, described, accounted for, and valued in philosophical theories. Whereas traditional ethics focused on universal and abstract rules of reason—resulting in the exclusion of women as subjects of morality and the consequent devaluation of what was considered feminine—feminist ethics appeals to individual, contextual experiences. As opposed to the logocentric approach of traditional ethical theories, these feminist ethics also refer to feelings and emotions as important indicators in making moral decisions. Feminist ethics also tends to abolish the traditional division into public and private spheres: that which is associated with the private sphere is subject to moral evaluation to the same extent as actions in the public sphere. As noted by Alison M. Jaggar, feminist approaches to ethics must take into account

Individual actions in the context of broader social practices, evaluating the symbolic and cumulative implications of any action as well as its immediately observable consequences. They must be equipped to recognize covert as well as overt manifestations of domination, and subtle as well as blatant forms of control, and they must develop sophisticated accounts of coercion and consent. Similarly, they must provide the conceptual resources for identifying and evaluating the varieties of resistance and struggle in which women, particularly, have engaged. They must recognize the often unnoticed ways in which women and other members of the underclass have

refused cooperation and opposed domination while acknowledging the inevitability of collusion and the impossibility of totally clean hands. (Jaggar 1991, p. 98)

At the most general level, feminist ethics is situated within the framework of social ethics, with an emphasis on the practical dimension of each moral reflection. According to feminist ethicists, the source and object of reference of any ethics should be life practice and the specific situations in which the subject finds herself (Sevenhuijsen 1998, pp. 37–40). At the center of life practice are interpersonal relationships, which themselves determine the shape of ethical reflection in feminist terms (Held 1995a, pp. 153–76). The concept of relationships, as understood by feminist ethicists, is associated with empathy, responsibility, interdependence, the dialogical autonomy of individuals, and care (Keller 1997). It is precisely around these concepts that one of the many proposals of the feminist approach to moral issues—i.e., the ethics of care—is focused.¹

3. The Feminist Ethics of Care

The roots of the feminist ethics of care can be found in nineteenth-century thinkers and activists such as Elizabeth C. Stanton, Catherine and Harriet Beecher, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (Tong 2000, pp. 617–20). These authors indicated the existence of a women’s morality separate from, and in some respects superior to, that of men, if only because women performed most of the work related to the private sphere and thus carried out the development and security of fundamental interpersonal relationships. The concept of the ethics of care in its modern meaning was proposed in 1982 by Carol Gilligan, then completed and disseminated by Nel Noddings.

Gilligan’s ethics of care was created as a result of her academic polemic against her Oxford teacher, the psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg. At that time, researchers were occupied with the issue of a human being’s moral development; it was precisely the divergence of views on this issue that led her to formulate a new position on moral theory (Blum 1988). Gilligan pointed out that the scale for evaluating a human being’s moral development proposed by Kohlberg (Kohlberg 1981) failed to account for the ways in which women resolve moral dilemmas. Gilligan conducted her own empirical research in this area, concluding that there should be two separate scales to capture and evaluate human moral development. In justifying her claim, Gilligan noted that, for historically and culturally shaped reasons, women, in making moral evaluations and choices, were guided more often than men by care, responsibility, and concern for interpersonal relationships. Men, on the other hand, as demonstrated by the Kohlberg scale, more often referred to the concept of justice and ethics based on abstract rules and powers:

When one begins with the study of women and derives developmental constructs from their lives, the outline of a moral conception different from that described by Freud, Piaget, or Kohlberg begins to emerge and informs a different description of development. In this conception, the moral problem arises from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights and requires for its resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract. This conception of morality as concerned with the activity of care centers moral development around the understanding of responsibility and relationships, just as the conception of morality as fairness ties moral development to the understanding of rights and rules. (Gilligan [1982] 2003, p. 19)

Gilligan’s research has shown that each gender prefers a different type, and creates a different hierarchy, of values. What is paramount for women is a relationship that arises and develops based on a sense of care and of responsibility. Men emphasize universality and the rule of law. Gilligan noted that, confronted with moral dilemmas, women face a conflict of responsibility, men of rights (Gilligan [1982] 2003, pp. 138–42). In the opinion

of Seyla Benhabib, the intellectual feud between Kohlberg and Gilligan reflected above all the differences between two ethical orientations, universalism and particularism, and more broadly between a universalist and rational ethic of justice and a particular and emotive ethic of care (Benhabib 1986).

Alongside the project of the ethics of care proposed by Gilligan is the ethical proposal of Nel Noddings. The names of both authors often appear simultaneously in discussions of the feminist ethic of care; however, Noddings not only proposed her own concept independently of Gilligan's considerations, but her position is more radical and her approach is defined differently. It should be emphasized that Gilligan conducted research in the field of moral psychology and rarely referred directly to normative ethics, whereas Noddings, as a philosopher and educator, focused mainly on philosophical and normative reflections. Undoubtedly, however, one can identify certain common beliefs presented by both authors, such as the rejection of moral universalism, moral particularism, and criticism of the male-centric perspective in research on human morality and traditional formulations of ethical theories.

Within the framework of her ethical considerations, Noddings addressed the problem of raising children and of relations between parents and children, or more broadly, between educators and pupils. She noted that it is precisely these relationships that define the identity of the individual and constitute the basic point of reference for human existence. The most fundamental relationship is natural care, whose structure is best reflected in the relationship between mother and child (Noddings 1984, pp. 9–10). Within the framework of every relationship based on care, we find a person giving care and a person who is the object of that care. Both sides of the relationship are active, giving and receiving, respectively, feelings of care. However, the essential feature in the context of the development of this structure in the direction of tenderness is that the relationship of care, although asymmetrical, is not marked by inequality. The asymmetry results from the fact that, in a relationship between two individuals, at times, one is the provider of care, and at other times, the other provides care (Noddings 1984, p. 48). An asymmetrical caring relationship is the basis for building broader bonds, more profound relationships, reciprocal trust, and a sense of responsibility. Noddings emphasized that care, thus understood, is an imperative that opens up human relationships to something greater than the mere duty to be kind and to avoid harming others. Therefore, care as a moral imperative, in Noddings' view, is not exclusively an abstract construct referring to the intention of the subject; rather, it is supported by concrete individual acts (Noddings 1989, pp. 100–2). Care, Noddings writes, is the result of women's experiences, partakes of a relational nature, and constitutes not a complement to traditional ethics based on the idea of justice but an alternative (Noddings 1984, p. 28).

The aim of this synthetic characterization of the basic assumptions underlying the feminist ethics of care has been to grasp its main postulates and to describe the concept of care central to this theory. Despite numerous criticisms of the theory and difficulties arising therefrom (see Card 1990; Hoagland 1991, pp. 246–63; Jaggar 1991, pp. 78–106), the ethics of care is an interesting proposal for a theoretical approach to moral issues. Unlike many classical systems, this ethics assumes a caring relationship between two human beings, as opposed to the individual consciousness of the moral subject, as the basis of human existence and the starting point for ethical reflection. Within the framework of the feminist ethics of care, assumptions concerning the need for rationality, objectivity, and universality in ethical theory, accepted implicitly in traditional moral philosophy, are called into question (Hekman 1995). The remedy for deficiencies, exclusivism, and gender conditioning (male-centricity) of traditional ethical systems is assumed to be care, as a feeling resulting from the life practice and experiences of women, which, at least in a postulative sense, constitutes the foundation of every human relationship.

4. Linguistic Meanderings of *Tenderness*

In turning to considerations on the concept of tenderness proposed by Olga Tokarczuk, I will begin by calling attention to essential linguistic aspects associated with the translation of *czułość* (tenderness) into other languages, especially English. In referring to dictionaries of the Polish language (the native tongue of Tokarczuk), we find several basic definitions of tenderness: (1) emotionality, cordiality; (2) gentleness; (3) sensitivity regarding a given point; and (4) sensitivity to stimuli (including words, actions, phenomena, situations). *Czułość* is also a technical term, signifying the degree of reaction of film to light. Although this meaning of *czułość* may appear remote from the considerations proposed here, *reactivity* is as important in this context as emotionality or sensitivity. Indeed, reactivity evokes associations with mindfulness and precision, as well as with a gaze that is both engaged and focused. All of these semantic nuances are contained in the word *czułość* as used by Tokarczuk.

In many respects, the translators of the Polish author's works into English, Antonia Lloyd-Jones and Jennifer Croft, have not had an easy task (Esposito 2020). Tokarczuk's work is characterized by extraordinary lexical richness and less than obvious, often neological, combinations of words. Olga Bagińska-Shinzato, who translated Tokarczuk's work into Brazilian Portuguese, describes her books as "paintings, tender studies of the human soul, body, emotions, mind (Croft 2020)." When faced with something as ephemeral, intangible, and phantasmagoric as stories about human souls, emotions, and minds, inevitably, every translation is vulnerable to the loss of certain meanings and blurring of the nuances of the narration. In this sense, a linguistic translation always involves a certain loss, since the relationship between meaning and form is vague, extremely complex, and difficult to grasp. It turns out that translation is never a simple transition from language *x* to language *y*; words, as Tokarczuk poetically described them, are like lizards that can escape from any enclosure (Tokarczuk 2021).

Paradoxically, translation simultaneously yields enrichment and gain in terms of the content and meaning of the work. One of the modern giants of translation studies, George Steiner, notes that "[t]he work translated is enhanced. This is so at a number of fairly obvious levels. Being methodical, penetrative, analytic, enumerative, the process of translation, like all modes of focused understanding, will detail, illumine, and generally body forth its object (Steiner [1975] 2000, p. 189)." Translation reveals new meanings and discovers new semantic fields, thanks to which, it seems, the work stays alive and produces effects on a wider audience: "[T]ranslation is a way of life, a bridge between people and cultures (Croft 2020)."

In the English translation we are interested in here, the Polish title of Tokarczuk's Nobel speech, "*Czuły narrator*," was rendered as "The Tender Narrator," and *czułość* itself was given as *tenderness*. The Polish word *czułość* is primarily associated with various shades of feelings, emotional sensation and susceptibility, and compassion. To this pool of meanings, Tokarczuk, reaching for the historical sources of the Polish word, added the sharing of one fate, concern over another's existence, and the personification or empowerment of other beings:

Czuły, originally from the verb *czuć* "to feel, sense," therefore originally meant "one who feels/senses," but it eventually became lexicalized as referring to someone treating another person with love and kindness. The noun *czułość* can be used to describe such relations only when they involve the ability to tune into the emotional states of others, or—as a dictionary of Polish from the early twentieth century put it—"the capacity to receive external and internal impressions" (indeed, such a meaning of both the adjective *czuły* and noun *czułość*, referring to physical sensation, still functions in modern Polish). (Kłosińska 2020)

The main collocations of the English verb *to tend*, which is the basis for the adjective *tender* and the noun *tenderness*, suggest the care of someone who is sick or disabled (to

tend the sick), or mindfulness, as in the formulation *to tend a fire*. An important role is also played here by the synonymous verb *to attend*, which can mean to take care of someone, to concern oneself with someone, to be physically or mentally present (attend church or attend a class), or to listen attentively. Whereas the Polish word *czułość* refers primarily to the domain of the senses and of emotional experience and feeling, its English equivalent, *tenderness*, refers rather to physical care, assistance, and bodily and mental presence.

Tokarczuk's use of *czułość* covers all of the above-mentioned semantic areas. The English word *tenderness* redirects attention to mindfulness, concentration on details, and conscious presence, but what is essential in the Polish word *czułość*—an appeal to emotions, feelings, and senses—remains in the background. The semantic richness of the word *czułość* opens up numerous interpretative horizons. In the paragraphs to follow, I propose to take a look at tenderness from these two perspectives: ethical and aesthetic. Firstly, tenderness will be interpreted as a new ethical imperative, constituting an elaboration of the feminist ethics of care; however, in this approach, tenderness differs in several fundamental aspects from the feminist understanding of care. Next, tenderness will be described in aesthetic terms, since, in accordance with the considerations of the Polish Nobel Prize winner, ethical and aesthetic views of the world are intrinsically related.

5. *Czułość* (Tenderness) as Existential Attunement

In one interview, Tokarczuk stated that

[t]enderness thus appears to be a much more natural attitude towards the world and life than anything else. It is a sense of a deep, fundamental bond with everything that is alive and that endures. It has nothing to do with “bending over” someone else, or with sentimentality. In this sense, it is even more intellectual than emotional. (Kantner 2020)

Tenderness, as Tokarczyk understands it, is a kind of intellectual attitude towards the world, natural, innate, and inherent in the human species. Thus, tenderness appears as a kind of cognitive attitude of intellectual provenance, albeit not limited, as it turns out, to the rules of reason. Later in the interview, Tokarczuk adds that

[t]enderness and anger [...] are rather emotions that are part of the same continuum: involvement, taking charge of something, participating deeply in some event, in a process, in a relationship. Tenderness is entering into a relationship with someone who is not me, based on compassion, sharing, understanding, and unconditional acceptance. It is also, and perhaps first and foremost, a feeling that we share a common fate, and thus tenderness also enriches the one who feels it. (Kantner 2020)

Tenderness is an emotion, a feeling, and in a broader perspective, a mental state, expressing the relationship of one person to other people, beings, phenomena, events, or situations. Etymologically, *emotion* derives from the Latin *emovere*, which means *to move* and refers to a state of movement of the mind. This movement occurs suddenly, is transient, and is associated with a somatic sensation. Tenderness, understood emotionally, is therefore a movement of the mind in response to an external experience which is simultaneously corporeal, tangible, and material.

Tokarczuk regards tenderness as being situated at the intersection of the intellectual and emotional spheres. This is most emphatically indicated by one of the closing fragments of “The Tender Narrator,” in which the author states that “[t]enderness is the most modest form of love [...] It appears wherever we take a close and careful look at another being, at something that is not our ‘self’ (Tokarczuk 2019b).” As a form of love, tenderness is located along the spectrum of the most fundamental human emotions and feelings—those most sought after, desired, and longed for, which are, at the same time, universal. Tenderness is, as well, a kind of intellectual concentration. As such, it is neither momentary nor contingent. It signifies “peering” into another being, but in a way that seemingly

necessitates intensive concentration and de facto “disengagement” of one’s sense of sight. This emotional–intellectual understanding of tenderness may suggest that it is a kind of empathy, the ability to imagine mental and emotional states alike, as well as comprising ways of thinking about other beings (especially human beings). However, Tokarczuk dissuades us from interpretations of this kind, emphasizing that tenderness goes far beyond empathetic fellow feeling. Instead, it is the conscious, though perhaps slightly melancholy, common sharing of fate. Tenderness is deep emotional concern about another being, its fragility, its unique nature, and its lack of immunity to suffering and the effects of time (Tokarczuk 2019b).

In various passages of her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Tokarczuk places special emphasis on “concerning oneself” with another being, on “looking” in a manner that enlivens, appreciates, and enhances: “Tenderness perceives the bonds that connect us, the similarities and sameness between us. It is a way of looking that shows the world as being alive, living, interconnected, cooperating with, and codependent on itself (Tokarczuk 2019b).” In seeking the term that would best summarize and calibrate the author’s intentions, the idea of *attunement*, understood in psychosomatic terms, comes to mind—specifically, a half-conscious attitude towards the world, adopted in relation to other entities and phenomena. The term *attunement* implies, above all, involvement, partiality, curiosity, sensitivity, and “affectivity in reading the world (Wądolny-Tatar 2022).” Tender attunement is a fundamental existential position, one which, according to the proposed considerations, may constitute a new ethical imperative, transcending the framework of the feminist ethic of care.

6. *Czułość* (Tenderness) as a New Ethical Imperative

I propose to view tenderness from an ethical perspective, as a proposition for a new ethical imperative. In this context, it is worth considering the ways in which tenderness is an extension and complement of the feminist understanding of care, and why it is a better (i.e., more appropriate, corresponding better to the challenges of the present day) moral guidepost.

Firstly, tenderness is a broader, inclusive, more universal concept in its objective aspect. Tender attunement refers not only to other humans, but also to the entire universe of living beings as well as—to an equal degree—to the inanimate world, the world of things, objects, and phenomena. Tenderness transcends the anthropocentric perspective of relationships between two (or more) human beings and, to quote Tokarczuk, it is the art of personifying, of sharing feelings, and thus endlessly discovering similarities. Creating stories means constantly bringing things to life, giving an existence to all the tiny pieces of the world that are represented by human experiences, the situations people have endured and their memories. Tenderness personalizes everything to which it relates, making it possible to give it a voice, to give it the space and the time to come into existence, and to be expressed. It is thanks to tenderness that the teapot starts to talk (Tokarczuk 2019b).

Tender attunement is the art of personification, signifying the ability to perceive elements of the animate and inanimate world in subjective aspects—in other words, granting subjective status, the status of a person, to all living beings, but also, importantly, to those “tiny pieces of the world” that, although not alive, are an inseparable element of human existence. Tenderness is a denial of the objectification of other people, animals, plants, hybrid beings, and the resources of our planet. Tenderness is a post-anthropocentric attitude, signifying the belief that “objects have their own problems and emotions, as well as a sort of social life, entirely comparable to our human one”; that animals are “mysterious, wise, self-aware creatures with whom we had always been connected by a spiritual bond and a deep-seated similarity”; and that “rivers, forests and roads had their existence too—they were living beings that mapped our space and built a sense of belonging, an enigmatic *Raumgeist* (Tokarczuk 2019b).” It is worth noting here that the literary devices of personification and metaphors used by Tokarczuk serve to express certain, deeply philosophical beliefs about the reality that surrounds human beings. In an artistic way, Tokarczuk expresses ontological and epistemological statements, which, however, we should not understand literally. The author does not claim that the teapot, mountains, or rivers—

if we treat them subjectively—will speak to us with a clear, human voice. It is more about the human attitude towards these inanimate objects and phenomena, and thus, about the types of relationships we can or should build with them. These will be relationships based on respect, equality, openness, or admiration, instead of exploitation, objectification, and subordination. Tenderness, thus, transcends care (understood in the anthropocentric sense), whose maternal provenance, referring to the relationship of mother and child, is limited to the universe of interpersonal relationships. Eva-Kersti Almerud notes that the post-anthropocentric perspective forms a part of most of Tokarczuk's narratives, because it makes it possible to overcome traditional divisions and borders, whether literary (stylistic, genre-related), or geographical, moral, and aesthetic (Almerud 2017). Moreover, within the framework of this perspective, Tokarczuk rejects rigid divisions into human and nonhuman, factual and fictional, historical and mythical, rational and irrational, or real and unreal (Croft 2020). As an expression of a post-anthropocentric attitude, tenderness encompasses and integrates all of these areas without evaluating or hierarchizing them. It is also worth noting that tenderness, in Tokarczuk's understanding, is an art (personification), and thus a kind of activity that can be learned and consciously practiced. Tender attunement is an intellectual–emotional attitude inherent in the human species, an attitude which, as the author suggests, has been neglected and drowned out in the modern world. However, we can still return to it and learn again to “look at another being, at something that is not our ‘self’ (Tokarczuk 2019b)” with tenderness.

Secondly, tenderness transcends the feminist understanding of care in its subjective aspect. Tenderness characterizes the “fourth-person,” “panoptic” narrator whose existence Tokarczuk postulates. The need to employ such a narrator, and thus the need for a new way of receiving, experiencing, relating to, and telling stories about the world, is in Tokarczuk's case, an outgrowth emerging from profoundly ethical motives. According to the author, only the adoption of broad, sensitive optics enables perception of the network of mutual dependencies and connections in the world, which in turn is a prerequisite for the harmonious symbiosis of human and nonhuman life on our planet. In this context, Tokarczuk writes:

Leaving aside all theological doubts, we can regard this figure of a mysterious, tender narrator as miraculous and significant. This is a point of view, a perspective from where everything can be seen. Seeing everything means recognizing the ultimate fact that all things that exist are mutually connected into a single whole, even if the connections between them are not yet known to us. Seeing everything also means a completely different kind of responsibility for the world, because it becomes obvious that every gesture “here” is connected to a gesture “there,” that a decision taken in one part of the world will have an effect in another part of it, and that differentiating between “mine” and “yours” starts to be debatable. (Tokarczuk 2019b)

Thus understood, a tender narrative about the world is one that bears the hallmarks of universalism—but universalism in a new, more inclusive formula. For, as Agnieszka Trzeciak Huss notes,

Tender narration nurtures an alternative form of universalism, one not intent on propagating properties by essentializing them and subsuming them under laws, but rather allowing new and hidden connections to emerge, for variety to be tended and cultivated. This form of universalization looks more like the universe itself, full of interplanetary bodies and constellations above, and rhizomatic connections below, with human and non-human agents interacting in between, passing into and out of existence while generating light and heat, darkness and cold, in places that give rise to spaces which collapse, grow again, and are inhabited and abandoned by all manner of beings. (Trzeciak Huss 2021)

Although this panoptical, integrational picture of the narrator's world may appear universalizing, it nevertheless embodies a perspective enabling the world to be perceived and valued as a heterogeneous, changeable, fluid, ambiguous whole. Trzeciak Huss writes about the rhizomatic connections structuring reality, in which each human or non-human being creates a network of changing relationships. It is essential to see, apprehend, and appreciate this diversity of beings and their relationships. This approach is also connected with the realization that humanity is only a part of a larger complicated whole and that human actions, verbal and nonverbal, entail wide-ranging consequences (Aleksandrowicz 2021)—a conclusion with direct reference to the problem of responsibility, which Tokarczuk addresses in the passage quoted above. Tenderness is indeed connected to responsibility, and therefore, viewed from a broader perspective, possesses a strong moral charge. Tender attunement in relation to the world provokes questions about who is responsible, and for what, as well as the scope of this responsibility and its significance in terms of human and nonhuman life. Finding answers to these questions necessitates the revision of traditional value systems, expansion of the subjective universe, and rendering of justice to nonhuman entities (Kantner 2019, p. 14).

Tenderness also differs from the feminist approach to care in terms of gender issues. Care, in feminist terms, was derived by scholars such as Gilligan and Noddings from women's experiences and everyday life, and subsequently characterized as women's way of relating to the world and to people. Thus understood, care is limited to the human universe and forms part of an essentialist understanding of gender (Mikkola 2022). In terms of the ethics of care, an implicit division exists between feminine and masculine values, thus replicating and reproducing not only binary thinking about gender, but also the associated sociocultural connotations and stereotypes. In feminism, (female) care is contrasted with (male) rationality, objectivity, and universality, which exposes ethics based on the concept of care to numerous accusations regarding its exclusivism, elitism, situationality, and particularism (see Grimshaw 1992; Levin 2000, pp. 361–67; Nobis 2005). Meanwhile, tenderness in Tokarczuk's approach situates itself beyond thinking about gender in binary terms. The tenderly attuned narrator neither perceives the world within the framework of oppositional thinking about sexuality, nor forms part of such opposition. This does not mean, however, that tenderness is impersonal, or that it is devoid of subjectively defined conditions. Tenderness is subjective and contextual, but at the same time, unprejudiced, sensitive, and open to what is different. In her work, Tokarczuk repeatedly demonstrates that this tender perspective, thus understood, is possible; that there are tender methods of narration that “serve to express the condition of the world, of humanity, and of other beings in relationship, entanglement, and communitarian existence, exposing the deficits of anthropocentrism in the face of the impossibility of completely eliminating the human point of view (Wądolny-Tatar 2022).”

Let us note, then, that care, understood in feminist terms, is not a holistic stance creating a unifying picture of the world, nor is it a fixed attitude concerning reality. Care is limited to interpersonal relationships, denoting above all individual acts directed towards selected beings that are accorded the status of moral subjects. Meanwhile, tenderness, in the formula proposed by Tokarczuk, is a kind of permanent attunement that can manifest itself or materialize in particular acts. Tenderness, therefore, is not limited to single acts in relationships between human beings; rather, it is a non-exclusive, permanent existential attitude towards a heterogeneous reality composed of various entities. A tenderly attuned subject is characterized by an open attitude towards the world, in which entities are not valued according to their gender, race, origin, beliefs, or utility. Tenderness can be characterized as a kind of epiphany—an appearance or revelation that takes place as the subject looks at the world and reacts to it. Therefore tenderness possesses a melancholy (understood more as a reverie than sadness), moody, sentimental character, constituting at the same time a subjective, temporal continuum, not only referring to the human and non-human world, but doing so continuously, as a permanent ethical stance resulting from a change in perception of what is subjective. In this way, tenderness as an ethical imperative

transcends the reductionism of traditional dualistic philosophy, a framework within which whatever is moral and ethical is allocated exclusively to human beings and to the anthropocentric perspective. To undermine this perspective is not a new idea in the twenty-first century; however, it seems that, at present, we are still looking for solutions that would make the ideas of ethical egalitarianism more universal and comprehensible and, ultimately, that would implement them. Tenderness, understood as an existential attunement resulting in an inclusive, post-anthropocentric moral attitude towards reality as a whole, can serve as a proposal to implement these very ideas.

7. Tender Aesthetic Experience

There is one additional aspect in which tenderness and the feminist understanding of caring differ significantly. Not only does tenderness possess a fundamental ethical dimension, but it can also be interpreted in aesthetic terms. Existential tender attunement is not merely an ethical attitude, but possesses a profoundly aesthetic character. This is indicated by the previously cited words of Tokarczuk: “Tenderness is the most modest form of love [...] It appears wherever we take a close and careful look at another being, at something that is not our ‘self’ (Tokarczuk 2019b).” The thought expressed in this short fragment refers directly to aesthetic reflection, as the author writes about attention and concentration as circumstances in which tenderness appears—and after all, an attentive and concentrated view of things is an attitude that conditions the aesthetic experience as expressed in traditional Kantian terms (Stolnitz 2008, p. 78).

In traditional aesthetics, the aesthetic attitude required disinterestedness, a contemplative mood, distance and isolation, and an interest in the appearance of the object (Kant [1790] 2000). A contemplative aesthetic experience meant a purely intellectual concentration of attention on the work in question and detachment from all other activities; its result was supposed to be aesthetic pleasure constituting a kind of intellectual satisfaction (Shelley 2009). The traditional—i.e., based on the ideals of objectivity, universality, and rationality—description of contact with art, or more broadly, an aesthetic object, undoubtedly lost its significance in the face of the diversity of artistic phenomena and new aesthetic theories as the twentieth century gave way to the twenty-first (see Carroll 2001; Kieran 2005; Ribeiro 2012). Discourse on art, along with artistic creation itself, became more egalitarian, flexible, and open to new concepts and aesthetic terms. As one of these terms, we can acknowledge the tenderness proposed by Tokarczuk, which constitutes a contradiction of contemplative, distanced, impersonal, and rational views of reality. Tenderness, interpreted aesthetically, is an inclusive term, referring simultaneously to the human and nonhuman, animate, and inanimate worlds. Moreover, it implies both intellectual and emotional involvement, and is associated with openness, mindfulness, and sensitivity.

Let us note that Tokarczuk’s prose is an example of just such a tender narrative, emanating sensitivity, commitment, and admiration for the beauty, diversity, and fragility of the world. In her works, Tokarczuk captures and exposes those dimensions, aspects, and recesses of reality that we are unaccustomed to regard as worthy of aesthetic appreciation. Moreover, she repeatedly encourages and recommends a focus on details, on trifles, on the already mentioned “tiny pieces of the world” in which its true—and currently underappreciated—beauty is hidden: “There is too much world, so it’s better to concentrate on particulars, rather than the whole (Tokarczuk 2019a, p. 238).” Tender aesthetic experience of the world means an engaged, active view thereof, one which makes every being, even the smallest, a noteworthy subjective aesthetic object, and thus the “object” of delight, admiration, and fascination. Tokarczuk writes about a “careful look at another being, at something that is not our ‘self’”; thus, tender experience of reality consists not of passive observation or detached contemplation, but of penetration of and coexistence with another being, of sympathy and shared experience. This is what happens, for example, in the novel *House of Day, House of Night*, in which the author carries out a literary transformation of a human being into a fungus: “If I weren’t a person, I’d be a mushroom. I would be generous to all insect life; I would give away my body to snails and maggots

(Tokarczuk 2003, p. 126).” The mushroom functions here as a metaphor for tolerance, acceptance, and recognition of the subjectivity of nonhuman beings. From a tender perspective, such a prosaic entity as a mushroom appears as a generous, life-giving part of a greater whole, important for maintaining its balance, homeostasis, and also—in aesthetic terms—its harmony.

In order to penetrate another being, to feel its emotions, to empathize with its situation, Tokarczuk often employs *prosopopeia*, a particular literary device in which a writer/narrator communicates to the audience by speaking as another person or object. *Prosopopeia* also refers to a figure of speech in which an animal or inanimate object is ascribed human characteristics or is spoken of in anthropomorphic language. As Ellen Mortensen notes, Tokarczuk uses *prosopopeia* “to give natural phenomena, different species as well as material objects positive qualities, and even souls. It allows her, for example, to give deer, dogs, plants, the Dark, the Light, as well as her car, a Samurai, human-like attribute (Mortensen 2021).” The personification of nonhuman entities in Tokarczuk’s prose is further reinforced by the use of capital letters for common nouns, i.e., for the names of objects, plants, animals, or phenomena. The Polish Nobel laureate deconstructs the anthropocentric tradition of naming only human subjects with capital letters, a tradition rooted in the dualistic thinking of us (human subjects) and them (everything that is not human). This thinking implies a negative evaluation of what is nonhuman and, as a result, a hierarchy of beings, questioned by Tokarczuk: “Who divided the world into useless and useful, and by what right? Does a thistle have no right to life, or a Mouse that eats the grain in a warehouse? What about Bees and Drones, weeds and roses? Whose intellect can have had the audacity to judge who is better, and who worse (Tokarczuk 2018, p. 71)?”

The effect of a personalizing, sensitive aesthetic attitude, rather than purely individual intellectual pleasure for the subject who perceives and experiences, is the shared satisfaction of discovering new values, meanings, and senses with another being. Sungeun Choi, the Korean translator of Tokarczuk’s works, notes that

Olga [Tokarczuk]’s work is full of tenderness for the world and for the others (not only humans, but also animals and plants), and this is what makes it so amazing and universal. It also seems to me that the subjects of OT’s work naturally attract the readers in the twenty-first century and draw their attention—for example, the nomadic nature of humans, the attempt to look at the world around us in a different way, myth as a universal model of human fate, the combination of realism and fantasy. (Croft 2020)

Tender aesthetic experience of the world therefore also consists of experiencing its otherness and strangeness. Tenderness as an aesthetic attitude does not differentiate the world into real and unreal, real and fantastic. Tenderness is not surprised by that which transcends the borders of experience of the senses and the reality comprehensible by the mind. On the contrary, what is beyond the bounds of rationality and intelligibility (as traditionally understood) is particularly worthy of being experienced and learned, as an essential element of human existence that has been depreciated and forgotten in the contemporary world. Tokarczuk writes about this loss of the sense of the world’s uniqueness and incomprehensibility in her essay “Ognosia,” noting that “[i]t used to be that the world was vast and unimaginable—now imagination is no longer useful to us, we have everything at our fingertips on our smartphone [...] since only what does not yield to our understanding can awaken our enthusiasm and retain the wonderful status of mystery (Tokarczuk 2022).” Tenderness, understood in aesthetic terms, is an attitude that enables one not only to experience, understand, and feel surrounding reality more fully, more precisely, and more attentively, but—through revealing its mystery, unknowability, and uniqueness—to be delighted, amazed, and charmed as well. Existential tender attunement offers a sense of aesthetic pleasure derived from being in a world that can never be fully known or tamed. It enables a fuller, more sensitive, more nuanced experience of the beauty of the post-anthropocentric world in all its complexity and diversity.

8. From a Relationship of Care to Tender Attunement

The interpretation of tenderness presented here shows the richness in meanings and contexts of the concept of a tender narrator, as proposed by Tokarczuk. The tenderness derived therefrom lies at the intersection of many discourses: literary, artistic, historical, cultural, psychological, sociological, and philosophical. In this article, tenderness has been interpreted in ethical and aesthetic terms and characterized as tender existential attunement of intellectual and emotional provenance. The starting point for these considerations was the feminist ethics of care, as one of the proposals based on women's life experiences for formulating a normative ethical theory. However, citing the relationship of care, attributed to women based on the experience of motherhood, as the foundation of ethical theory has proved problematic and is subject to criticism. According to the feminist approach, care is a gender-conditioned quality, and thus exclusive and particular. Moreover, the feminist understanding of care is limited to the universe of interpersonal relationships, which conditions its anthropocentric character.

The contemporary, post-anthropocentric world stands in need of concepts and terms that refer to a broad spectrum of entities and phenomena, and thus of discursive tools to capture and clarify reality in all its complexity and diversity. Tenderness, which in the interpretation presented here constitutes a new ethical imperative, is such a concept. This imperative is expressed through tender existential attunement; that is, an intellectual and emotional attitude towards reality characterized by inclusivity, openness, commitment, and sensitivity to that which is different. Tender attunement is a permanent readiness and capacity to confer personal status to all beings, associated with responsibility and a sense of community. In addition to its ethical dimension, tender attunement partakes of a profoundly aesthetic character, since attentive and sensitive viewing of the world enables the viewer to perceive and experience its beauty, strangeness, and mystery.

Tenderness lies at the intersection of the two perspectives, ethical and aesthetic, presented in the article; thus, it indicates new trajectories of thinking about reality and new ways of experiencing all of its manifestations. However, tenderness is not only a way of thinking about and experiencing the world. It is an imperative, and therefore a principle, a rule, or an order that can be derived directly from theoretical assumptions and which should be applied in everyday life. Tenderness as an ethical and aesthetic imperative aims to draw attention to this practical aspect. For tenderness is not only a philosophical ideal but a call to change human attitudes, actions, and relationships in the real world. Adopting and practicing a tender attunement is a proposal for a new way of being and acting in a world whose ontology is not limited to human beings. As an ethical imperative, tenderness calls attention to the multiplicity and diversity of beings, nonhuman included, valuing and empowering them. As an aesthetic imperative, tenderness brings out the beauty of a heterogeneous world, in which every being and phenomenon—even the smallest or the least significant—is the object of aesthetic attention and admiration. These two dimensions of tenderness, ethical and aesthetic, are essentially linked and complementary, and possess a reciprocal character. In the spirit of the ancient ideal of *kalokagathia*, Tokarczuk notes that, by looking at the world with tenderness and recognizing—without evaluating or hierarchizing—the subjective and moral status of its tiniest “pieces,” we will necessarily perceive its undeniable, though often not obvious, beauty. When tender attunement unveils the beauty of the world around us, we will be able to relate to it exclusively through commitment and responsibility. In conclusion, recalling the words of the Polish Nobel Prize winner, tender attunement enables one to see, understand, and experience that the world is “a living, single entity, constantly forming before our eyes, and as if we were a small and at the same time powerful part of it (Tokarczuk 2019b).”

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Note

- ¹ At present, various currents of ethics in feminist terms can be distinguished, among others women's, maternal, lesbian, political feminist, and feminist virtue ethics. See (Norlock 2019).

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