

*The Responsibilities of Reason.*

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Much work in feminist ethics in the last quarter century has been framed, in one way or another, by debates about the ethics of care and the supposed contrast between care and justice as basic moral categories. The foundational text in this regard is Carol Gilligan's In a Different Voice, a study in the psychology of moral development, which suggested that two contrasting moral orientations—a “care” orientation and a “justice” orientation—could be discerned, the former to be found more often in female subjects, and the latter more often in male subjects. The tendency found in her female subjects to construe moral problems in terms of responsibility, responsiveness to need, and a great attention to context and particularity, and to eschew a “merely” rational and rule- or principle-based approach, had traditionally been interpreted as a failure to reach the higher stages of moral development, but on Gilligan's view, it was the exemplification of a different, but certainly no less valid, moral framework. The intriguing suggestion for feminist ethicists was that taking account of women's experience on its own terms, as it were, could yield important insights for moral philosophy generally, and perhaps even an entirely new kind of moral philosophy. Gilligan's seminal study, along with work on the moral and political significance of mothering (especially by Sara Ruddick), and, generally, a radical feminist critique of the false universalization of male experience across all areas of scholarship, culture and politics, inspired a rich vein of thinking and writing on the subject of care and the possibility of an “ethics of care”.

Care theorists' negative points—their complaints about what they styled “justice ethics”—are central to an understanding of what an ethic of care could mean. In traditional ethics, they argued, the rational, autonomous moral agent was (sometimes explicitly) modeled on the male: Man was the measure of all things ethical, one might say. Man was also the measure of all things political, and many of the charges against “justice ethics” seem targeted at liberalism in

particular: this reflects, I think, an important problem for the care approach, and I shall return to it in due course. Certainly, the historical experiences of women as the primary caregivers in society did not loom large in moral (or political) philosophy. “Caring” in this sense was not considered to be of any special philosophical interest, and the values or virtues associated with it, or with the women who did it, were largely absent from moral theory. The resulting canon unwarrantedly placed values historically associated with male experience—justice, equality, autonomy, independence, reason—above values historically associated with women—cooperation, empathy, interrelatedness, and so on.

The remedy, most care theorists urged, was not the creation of a “women’s morality”, (Gilligan 2) but to ask whether, or to what extent, the ignored values could be of moral significance for all. Some work in care ethics, especially in “maternalist” approaches (e.g. Ruddick, Held, at some points Noddings), seems to (at least implicitly) endorse some kind of essentialism about women or “female” virtues, but this is typically accompanied by a claim to be recommending “mothering” as an approach for men as well as women. I should make clear at this point that I do not endorse any kind of essentialist or gendered account of morality, and would be cautious about using any one kind of caring relation (such as mothering) as a paradigm for moral action generally. I would have a good deal of sympathy with the Wollstonecraftian argument that many “female virtues” may, in large part, be byproducts of patriarchal oppression. However, this does not, in my view, mean that many values that have historically been associated with women cannot be degendered and then recommended as moral values for everyone.

This latter is one of the central questions I wish to address in my dissertation. Can the experiences of caregivers yield important insights for moral and political philosophy? Is “care” at the heart of morality? I think the answer to both questions is yes. However, assigning a role for care in ethics should not, in my view, exclude what the term “justice ethics” seems to encompass: reason, autonomy, principle, rights. Indeed, as I shall argue, I am not sure that the language of the care debate—assuming that “care” and “justice” are distinct, coherent categories—is entirely helpful. We are arguably no clearer of the meaning of “justice ethics”

than we are about the meaning of “care ethics”, and this should be of concern to anyone thinking about care, since it is often defined in contrast to justice and framed in terms of a critique of justice ethics.

Although it is not always explicitly stated, Kant’s ethics seems to be a paradigmatic “justice” approach, and therefore a particular target for care-based critiques. Many of the stronger, especially earlier, formulations of care might indeed be read as anti-Kantian approaches to ethics. I think this is deeply problematic. Such implicit critiques seem to situate Kant straightforwardly in a liberal tradition that arguably incorporates claims that Kant would not agree with (see O’Neill). Care critiques are perhaps more effective as targeted at a broad tendency in liberal thought to value certain conceptions of reason and rationality, rights, value, and autonomy. Kant, correctly interpreted, can be defended from many care-based objections. Much recent work on Kant has yielded interpretations of his ethical and political thought that are in fact highly responsive to the most important elements of care. If these interpretations of Kant are right, as I think they (broadly) are, it can be argued that many care-based objections raised against Kant’s philosophy are based on misreadings of his position. Nevertheless, I would claim that taking care seriously can lead us to look at Kant’s theory in a new light, one which yields a better understanding of his ethics, and one that is more fruitful and relevant to moral life.

In my dissertation I shall pay a great deal of attention to recent work on Kant which, in my view, brings his moral theory into close alignment with what is right in care ethics. Philosophers such as Onora O’Neill and Barbara Herman, among others, have at certain points defended Kant from some care-based and related critiques, and I shall examine these in some detail in chapters two and three of my dissertation. Such defenses, in my view, are broadly correct, but they have avoided the suggestion that a Kantian approach may incorporate (or even should incorporate) care, or care’s concerns, explicitly. The strategy seems to be—and would be viewed by care theorists thus—to argue that care critiques miss their target because Kant’s ethics—or justice ethics—already contains all that is needed. In short, such defensive moves by Kantians (or others) would be seen as attempts to subsume care under justice, and this is resisted by care

ethicists, who see some distinctive aspects of care that cannot be adequately described in the existing framework of “justice ethics”.

My own strategy will be to engage in a careful re-examination of the terrain, both of care ethics and Kantian ethics, in order to determine what is of value in the care approach, to what extent Kantian ethics disposes of care-based critiques, and to what extent the care approach, in combination with contemporary interpretative work, may inform our reading of Kant, and what it may yield for our understanding of moral philosophy generally. I will suggest that contemporary Kantians may have reason to embrace a certain (modest) conception of care, and that care theorists may have reason to re-evaluate the Kantian framework. In particular, a moral theory that takes care seriously requires a suitable account of practical reason, and I think a Kantian account can serve this purpose.

Care theorists have claimed that care can be seen as an important category not only in ethics but in political philosophy too. Likewise, of course, contemporary Kantians have continued to examine Kant’s contribution to political thought, both directly and in his influence on John Rawls. Again, I think that each of these approaches could shed light on the other.

I suspect that care theorists have been fighting an ill-defined adversary (“justice ethics”) and that this has served to prevent a fruitful dialogue between care theorists and Kantians, who have busily been re-interpreting Kant in a way that makes his theory resemble what Clement calls the ideal type of justice less and less. I hope that it will move the debate forward if a sympathetic interpreter of care and of Kantian ethics can clear the ground for such a dialogue. My sympathy for care ethics is not, however, unqualified, as shall become clear in the following. I believe some claims held by many care theorists to be untenable. Nevertheless, I believe that the care approach offers insights about moral life and moral philosophy that are of the first importance, and which the enterprise of ethics can ill-afford to ignore. As I shall argue, I think that the care approach offers insights of similar significance to political thought (and has some very valuable things to say on the subject of how political theory and activism ought to relate).

I will be attempting to cast some doubt on the construction of the care-justice debate, but without rejecting the contribution care-based insights can make to moral and political theory. The care and justice categories or labels should be viewed with caution: they may be useful tools of exposition, bringing out particular aspects of morality, but I do not think they represent contrasting or opposing moral frameworks.

Chapter outline.

*Chapter one.*

The first chapter will trace the trajectory of the care debate, paying particular attention to the work of Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, and Grace Clement. The main task of the chapter will be to suggest what is of value in the care approach, and what requirements it sets out for a satisfactory moral theory.

I have chosen Gilligan, Noddings and Clement as representative thinkers in the care tradition since they each reflect an important aspect of the approach. Since Gilligan's work has been the main catalyst for the development of care ethics, I think it is wise to return to it. In a Different Voice is not, of course, a philosophical work, and it is important to be careful about basing philosophical positions upon it: Gilligan never explicitly argues for an ethic of care as an alternative framework in moral theory that could *replace* justice ethics, although she does refer to an ethic of care or responsibility, suggesting that it is in some sense *complementary* to "justice ethics". Her work can be variously interpreted by moral philosophers. It does suggest, certainly, that there are aspects of moral life, or perhaps, descriptions of moral life, often associated with women's historical experiences as primary caregivers, which have been ignored and which deserve close attention for the light they may shed on the nature of morality and what moral theory requires. The different voice need not mean an entirely different ethic, but it does say some interesting things about moral life and moral judgment.

Although, as we shall see, some of the more radical care-based thinking of recent decades has been deeply suspicious of reason, principle, abstraction, and autonomy, Gilligan does not engage in a thoroughgoing critique of any of these. To be sure, the “formal logic of fairness” upon which justice ethics is, according to Gilligan, based, is contrasted with care’s appeal to the “psychological logic of relationships” (73), but Gilligan’s sketch of what care ethics could be does not, it seems to me, eschew reason or necessarily exclude abstraction or principle, or devalue autonomy. The accounts of moral judgment that make use of the “different voice” implicitly appeal to certain principles, it seems to me: first, that self and other are interdependent and that connection between persons is a central (perhaps the central) value; second, that the moral community extends beyond those with whom one is personally connected (Gilligan writes of “an ethic of responsibility that stems from an awareness of interconnection... The stranger is still another person belonging to that group, people you are connected to by virtue of being another person” (57)); third, that failure of response (to the needs of others) is the chief moral failing or danger. Now, we should be careful of imputing philosophical claims to subjects in psychology experiments, or those who interpret such data, but these implicit claims do, I think, reflect some important moral ideas. Moral theory certainly must take as given the interdependence and interconnection of human persons (but it must also take account of their capacity for independence of thought and action, their individuality), and must deal in the currency of relationships (as Kantian ethics, rightly interpreted, does). Moral theory must also acknowledge that morality is not mere adherence to rules established through the exercise of calculative reason: a proper account of practical reason, taking account of the proper subjective aspect of morality, and the role of the moral emotions, a certain moral attitude of concern and responsiveness, is necessary.

The approaches of Noddings and Clement illustrate the diversity of interpretations possible within the care debate. Noddings’s Caring is one of the more radical construals of care ethics, eschewing the language of moral rules or principles entirely. Noddings seems, in most of the book, to be arguing for care as a basis for morality as a whole—that is, that we could do ethics

without justice—but later work has suggested that justice may be needed where “it is logistically impossible to exercise caring-for” (xvi). Instead of appealing to principle, Noddings appeals to “natural caring” as the foundation of “ethical caring” and as the direct source of moral obligation. Abstraction from the particulars of the caring relation and the responsiveness to need shown in it is morally dangerous in her view, since it leads away from action, from taking responsibility. It is interesting to examine her reasons for thinking so, but I shall argue that her conclusions are not warranted. Clement’s later work exemplifies another trend in care ethics: a series of attempts to (in some sense) integrate justice and care in moral theory. Clement usefully outlines the “ideal types” of justice and care and argues that we need not hold to these extreme versions of either in order to take both seriously. Indeed, a modified version of justice and of care can be integrated to some extent, although not in one single ethical framework. Although this last conclusion is one with which I cannot agree, the possibility of integration represents progress in the debate.

### *Chapter Two.*

This chapter will examine more critically the care approach, and more specifically, the explicit and implicit critiques of Kant contained in it. I will suggest and refer to defenses of a Kantian position in light of these objections. As well as continuing to examine the work of Gilligan, Noddings and Clement, I will refer to objections to Kant by Baier, Code and others.

A number of central concerns in care ethics can easily be seen as objections to Kant (and these have sometimes been made explicit). First, the question of abstraction, principle and particularity in ethics shall be considered. As will have been shown in the first chapter, many versions of care ethics share a suspicion of abstraction and principles or rules in ethical theory, on the grounds that it seems to leave out salient aspects of moral problems (leaving abstract principles as blunt instruments to deal with very specific situations), and that it makes more likely a failure to act, to

take responsibility (instead of doing something oneself, one will say “something should be done”). It is indeed a serious failure if one hides in abstraction and avoids acting to help others when one could, but this misses its target if meant as an objection to abstract principles in general, or to Kantian ethics in particular.

Using Kant’s texts (especially the Groundwork, Critique of Practical Reason and Metaphysics of Morals) and recent work on Kant by O’Neill and Herman, I shall argue that Kant’s ethics is a system in which principles guide action coherently while allowing for attention to specifics: it stands to reason that the specifics of the situation will determine which principle or principles of action apply. Now, there is no avoiding the difficulty of judging which principles are relevant to a given situation, but I see no alternative method by which this difficulty, and the danger of merely ad-hoc solutions to moral problems, could be avoided.

The objection to principle-based ethics on the grounds that it makes inaction more likely, is also a misfired criticism of Kant. Positive obligations to others are extremely important in Kant’s ethics. We must not have as our maxim to avoid helping others: that is, we must adopt a maxim of helping (at least some) others. We must also cultivate our capacities for sympathy and practical love, and never try to shield ourselves from an awareness of the human suffering that surrounds us: abstract principles provide limits and guidance for our actions—they certainly do not allow for inaction or avoidance of responsibility to others. A careful reading of Kant and Kant scholarship shows this quite clearly, I shall argue.

The interrelatedness of persons, and more or less implicit critiques of autonomy, are another familiar theme in the care literature. Kant is sometimes seen as holding a view of persons as radically separate, rational agents without affective ties to others or vulnerabilities to others. Again, a careful reading of Kant and Kant scholarship should lead us to another view. Kant’s view of human persons, on the contrary, takes full account of the tension between our individuality and our interconnectedness (through love, vulnerability, and need) to others. Many particular obligations (especially the impermissibility of a maxim of no mutual aid) flow from this recognition. Many problems stem from a lack of clarity about Kant’s conception of

autonomy, which is very different from other interpretations: autonomy in Kantian ethics means autonomy of the will, the capacity of the person for self-regulation, for giving law to oneself. It does not mean agency, independence or separateness from others. Using the work of O'Neill and Herman in particular, I shall try to clarify these distinctions as far as possible.

The final category of objections I shall deal with relate to the role of reason and feeling in ethics. I shall clarify Kant's arguments about inclination and feeling, including the role of "moral feeling", and the predispositions to respect the moral law. I shall also follow Herman in arguing that Kantian ethics adequately accommodates our sense of the significance and value of human relationships and does not set up a deep conflict between these attachments and moral duty.

### *Chapter Three.*

This chapter shall follow on directly from the previous chapter's defenses of Kant against some care-based objections, and shall examine whether, or to what extent, Kantian ethics either incorporates care in some sense, or can do without it. To put it another way, I shall ask whether defenders of Kant should, or could, use the language of care, or whether care is superfluous on a correct reading of Kantian ethics. In particular, I shall ask why there is no care (except in passing reference) in recent work on Kant which interprets his ethical theory as being quite remote from the ideal type of "justice ethics".

My provisional conclusion on this point is that something like care is, or should be, found in a Kantian ethical theory. However, I do not see "care ethics" and "justice ethics" as distinct, coherent, contrasting frameworks: I think the opposition set up between them is probably unhelpful. "Justice ethics" is no more amenable to easy definition than "care ethics" is, and an attempt to arrive at such definitions may not be a very fruitful pursuit. I do think that what has been described in care terms is important to include in moral theory, and I think it is worth paying particular attention to these concerns—the necessity of acknowledging the role of relationships of care in moral life and the moral danger of failing to respond with active concern

to the needs of other persons—and attempting to ensure that they do not get “lost” in a more traditional approach.

In this chapter I shall pay particular attention to recent secondary literature on Kantian ethics, especially from O’Neill and Herman, and also Baron, Korsgaard and others. I shall suggest that constructivist accounts of practical reason (e.g. O’Neill) can be of particular use and interest to those who take care-based concerns seriously, since it would provide an alternative to calculative or instrumental accounts of reasoning (which sit uneasily with care, especially the critique of rigidity and insensitivity to context and to the role of feeling in moral judgment), while avoiding an untenable rejection of reason in ethics.

#### *Chapter Four.*

This chapter shall examine the possibility of “political care”, using the work of Joan Tronto, Virginia Held, and Fiona Robinson, as well as Gilligan, Noddings and Clement. I shall suggest that the idea of political care can be useful, but cannot by itself provide a basis for political theory. Care’s emphasis on human interrelatedness and interdependence would yield a political theory sensitive to the role of political community and solidarity and appropriately suspicious of approaches that privilege mere formal rights without attention to the material conditions that might make them meaningful and the obligations that they imply. This, and the idea of responsibility so central in the care approach, can help us to think fruitfully about the morality of citizenship and the purpose of political community in responding to need and maintaining connection. However, a “care-only” approach carries significant dangers, as I shall argue. Politics demands principle, reason and an appropriate level of abstraction; we can incorporate care into politics without sacrificing these. We must also be wary of any version of political care that values connection and community to the exclusion of individual rights: human persons are both autonomous and interrelated, and political theory must take this tension into account. This is, of course, no simple task.

I shall explore the possibility of convergence between a modest conception of political care and Kantian principles (using Kant, Rawls and O'Neill), parallel with the conclusions argued for in chapters two and three. What would such an approach say about markets and economic justice? Might the left have particular reason to welcome such a convergence? I will suggest an affirmative answer.

The idea of "globalized care" and global obligations and rights shall also be considered, making particular reference to the work of Fiona Robinson. Could a Kantian universalism and account of imperfect duties provide a useful underpinning for (potentially vague) notions of global care? I shall investigate and argue for this possibility.

#### *Chapter Five.*

The concluding chapter will summarize the foregoing and complete the argument for my main claims: that care and justice are not opposing moralities or the bases for competing or even complementary moral frameworks, but rather, are two fundamental aspects of morality, difficult to distinguish, but both important; that the language of the care-justice debate, while it has served to call attention to certain very significant aspects of morality under the label of "care", has been in many ways unhelpful, as it has created an impression (false I believe) that care and justice are well-defined alternative "poles" of morality and moral thinking; relatedly, that the "justice" pole of the debate has not been satisfactorily defined, leading to some unfairly sweeping criticisms; that recent work on Kant brings his ethics into quite close alignment with what I believe to be the most correct and important insights of the care approach; that, in a certain modest sense, there is such a thing as Kantian care; that the insights of care, in dialogue with the Kantian tradition in particular, can be helpful in thinking about politics (especially in the context of globalization).

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