Literature Review: Ethics of Care

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Note: This assignment asks students to write a traditional (albeit it small) literature review, synthesizing the current scholarly conversation on a theory studied by academics. Writers are encouraged to use encyclopedias to ground themselves in the basics of their chosen theory before they begin reading scholarly essays that discuss or apply their chosen theory. After reading 10+ scholarly essays, writers should be able to identify and summarize a handful of conversations for their literature review and ultimately point toward areas for future research. This literature review becomes the foundation for their upcoming writing assignment: a scholarly essay. In this case, Olivia used Ethics of Care theory to reveal the surprising amount of feminist care in the seemingly hyper-masculine movie The Revenant.

In 1982, psychologist Carol Gilligan published her book *In a Different Voice*. The book was a response to the work of psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, for whom Gilligan had been a research assistant. Kohlberg's research on morality placed a person's moral development at one of six stages. In her book, Gilligan criticized Kohlberg's research for including predominantly male research subjects and for concluding that women, who did not reach the highest levels of development as often as men, were simply less morally developed than their male counterparts. Instead, Gilligan argued, Kohlberg had constructed an androcentric metric for moral development that did not value (stereotypically) female traits: making emotional moral judgements rather than rational ones, taking context and differences in various relationships into account when faced with moral problems. Gilligan called for a moral system which valued these traits rather than dismiss them as inferior (Held 27). This was the beginnings of ethics of care (or care ethics).

Though ethics of care had its inception in the field of psychology, it was quickly adopted by philosophers, particularly in the subfield of feminist moral philosophy. Feminist philosopher Nel Noddings published her book *Caring* in 1984. The book expanded upon Gilligan's ideas, establishing the nature of relationships in care ethics as well as the value of empathy in such a moral system (Held 27). *Maternal Thinking*, published by Sara Ruddick in 1989, focused specifically on parenting and the caring relationship of child to mother in the context of an ethic of care. The parent-child relationship (in particular that of mother to child) has become central to the current conversation on care ethic (Hardy; Taggart; Zondervan and Olthuis).

Scholarly discussion and debate of the ethics of care has continued into the present day. The theory has evolved and expanded from its inception in 1982 into a well-established feminist philosophy. Care ethics' generalizability and scope of application is a recurring topic of academic discussion. Some academics have argued for a place in care ethics for justice and autonomy, characteristics originally portrayed as in conflict with care ethics. As mentioned above, childcare is of particular interest to those writing in the field. Ethics of care's place among other ethical theories, and the question of whether it even deserves a classification of its own, remain controversial, with comparisons to Confucian and virtue ethics a recurring topic. Some place ethics of care alongside these theories, others see no distinction and place ethics of care as a subcategory of or break-off from others.

The Place of Justice and Autonomy in Ethics of Care

From the beginning, proponents of ethics of care have placed it in direct contrast with ethics of justice. Gilligan saw Kohlberg's conception of morality at an ethic of justice, devaluing the qualities which came to define ethics of care. Philosopher Virginia Held laid out these key qualities in her 2006 publication, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. According to Held, ethics of care values emotion in moral decision-making (Held 10). Historically, moral philosophical systems required doing away with all emotional attachments in order to make the "correct" choice. Care ethics instead embraces these feelings as valid. Ethics of care is also a fundamentally relational theory. Unlike a Kantian or utilitarian system, ethics of care considers decisions in context rather than placing them in an idealized vacuum. The theory holds that morality cannot be removed from the "real world" into a purely rational one (Held 10). Held also criticizes liberal individualistic moral theories, in which all individuals act as if in isolation (14).

The exact nature of the dichotomy between care and justice has frequently come under question. Held does not dismiss justice completely, but places care before it in importance. She claims that care can exist without justice but not vice versa, using family dynamics as an example of relationships with care but no justice (17). Others are critical of this view, taking issue with her particular example. They counter that Held's experience with justice-free households should not be overgeneralized to support her argument (Thomas 143). Still others see care versus justice as a false dichotomy, or at the least a dichotomy in

which the two are unnecessarily pitted against one another (Calder). Current scholarship more often sees care and justice as interdependent, both necessary for a complete moral system. A number of scholars now view justice in a more positive light, rather than as the rival to care ethics. Some argue that the undertaking of childcare requires a combination of care and justice to be optimally successful (Taggart). These academics see morality as a marriage of both views, rather than one over another.

With interdependence and emphasis on relationships key to ethic of care, philosophers writing about the theory have often offered explanations for how individuals maintain autonomy within such a system. Autonomy by definition suggests independence, a concept seemingly at odds with ethics of care. However, academics have reframed autonomy and explained its compatibility with the care system. One scholar ties care ethics to epistemic personhood: the awareness and trust of one's own needs. They maintain that through a balance of self-care and care for others, autonomy can be maintained in the ethics of care system (Borgwald). Held offers the explanation that autonomy is developed not independently but through interaction with others (48). In a similar vein, if children are engaged with adults in the caring process, some scholars argue, they gain the opportunity to develop autonomy (Hardy). These explanations have in common the assertion that autonomy is learned, and specifically learned relationally through interaction and experience with others. In this framing, autonomy is not at odds with ethics of care, but rather is a natural development within the theory.

Ethics of (Child) Care

The relationship between mother and child is perhaps the epitome of the theory of care ethics. A deeply connected relationship in which there is a caretaker and a cared-for is a pure representation of the care dynamic (Held 10). However, literature on the parent-child relationship has expanded to discuss relationships between a child and any caretaker, particularly professional childcare (Hardy; Taggart; Zondervan and Olthuis). Two Dutch scholars call for a general shift in the profession of childcare towards more emotional relationships with children (Zondervan and Olthuis). Childcare practices have recently tended towards calculated behaviors, they assert. A formulaic approach to childcare

contradicts care ethics, which values context and the complexities of unique relationships over universal principles.

Just as the Dutch scholars urge an ethics of care approach to the childcare profession, so does another academic. They see childcare currently treated as an obligation, something individuals do because they consider it a natural instinct. Even if a caregiver in the field truly enjoys their profession, they may not understand the moral value of their work. This academic encourages the application of ethics of care to connect this (Taggart). They also distinguish between showing compassion and pity in a caregiving role. Pity, as they define it, is emotionally empty and serves only to distance oneself from the recipient of care. Compassion, by contrast, allows for the emotional connection that is so central to relationships in ethics of care (Taggart). In these cases, scholars urge the practical application of ethics of care in caregiver-child relationships.

Even seemingly mundane and non-care-related aspects of the childcare profession are viewed through an ethics of care lens. One paper emphasizes the importance of applying ethics of care to the task of shift reporting (essentially paperwork). This activity is viewed by most in the childcare profession as a mundane but required chore. Instead, the paper suggests making shift reporting a collaborative effort between childcare professional (the caregiver) and the child (the cared-for). This opportunity to engage the children being cared for transforms clerical work into caregiving. In addition, by being given such responsibility, the children will continue to develop their autonomy (Hardy).

Who Falls Under Ethics of Care? Under What Does Ethics of Care Fall?

Those individuals most commonly referenced in ethics of care literature – parents and children, the sick and their caregivers, the elderly and their caregivers – are viewed as limiting by some. In their view, ethics of care includes only relationships that are imbalanced and non-reciprocal (Thomas 140), or disproportionately concern relationships that deal in suffering (Taggart). Others counter this critique with the view that in a web of unique and intertwining relationships, as proponents of ethical care see our moral lives, it would be an oversimplification to see any relationship as one-sided (Dingler). In addition to expanding to the childcare profession, the relationship of mother-child has expanded in the literature to account for unique parenting circumstances: "symbolic mothers," as one scholar refers to

them (Dingler). Some even propose that ethics of care can be applied on a larger scale than person-to-person. They suggest that the guiding principles of the theory can improve international relations and political conflict (Dingler). Above all, another scholar advises, we must give voice to those we care for and maintain a dialogue in all caring relationships (Calder).

While some debate who is included in the ethics of care, others debate where in moral philosophy ethics of care itself is included. Ethics of care has been compared to moral philosophies such as Confucian ethics (Held) and virtue ethics (Held; Thomas). Some contend that not only is ethics of care similar to virtue ethics, it is not unique enough from virtue ethics to constitute its own theory. While they concede that ethics of care provides a space for women in moral philosophy that previously did not exist, and is significant for that reason, the two theories themselves are indistinct (Thomas 134). In this view, ethics of care is simply a subcategory of virtue ethics that includes exclusively asymmetrical relationships (Thomas 139). Held, on the other hand, maintains that virtues are dispositions, while care is predominantly an action (51), thus distinguishing the two.

Conclusion

In the decades since *In Another Voice* launched the theory of ethics of care, much has been said about the subject. In recent years, the concept of ethics of justice has been viewed increasingly favorably in the literature; many consider ethics of care incomplete without it. Proponents of the theory see care and autonomy as compatible rather than contradictory. Ethics of care has expanded its scope to, for instance, the field of childcare. Numerous scholars support the practical application of the theory in this field. Expansion has also included a broader understanding of motherhood, international political application, and emphasis on dialogue between caregiver and cared-for. Scholars still compare and contrast ethics of care to other theories of moral philosophy, and debate whether or not ethics of care should even be considered a theory of its own. However, among the current conversation, I was unable to find academic discussion of ethics of care in the context of film and popular culture. My work will attempt to fill this gap in ethical care scholarship.

Works Cited

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